

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

BURIAL GROUND: HISTORY, ARCHAEOLOGICAL FINDINGS, PRESERVATION

When and how was the African Burial Ground discovered?

In the early 2000s, work on the Willis Ave Bridge adjacent to the MTA's 126th Street Bus Depot led to an examination 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, requiring further archaeological study.

What has the excavation and preservation process been to date?

In 2011, the MTA hired a consultant to evaluate the site's archeological history. The review of historical documents, termed as a "Phase 1A" study, revealed that the site had a long and varied history, having once been used as a burial ground (termed the "Harlem African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, the NYC Economic Development Corporation (NYCEDC) hired a team of archaeologists to perform a preliminary archeological dig, termed as "Phase 1B." Archaeologists did not find any evidence of human remains within the area of the historic Harlem African Burial Ground, but evidence of bone fragments was discovered elsewhere on the eastern portion of the site. No intact burials were found, as the burial ground site was disturbed and displaced in the mid-19th century after a succession of sales, construction, and subsurface disruptions. Elmendorf Reformed Church, the descendant church of the HABG, was involved in the removal of bone fragments 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?

With the confirmed discovery of the disarticulated remains of at least two individuals, immediate steps were taken to preserve the remains and artifacts, which are now being stored in a locked, climate-controlled storage space at the NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission's repository. NYCEDC has worked closely with the Harlem African Burial Ground Task Force (HABGTF), the New York State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), the Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) on all matters regarding the archeological excavation and human remains. Rev. Dr. Patricia A. Singletary, pastor of Elmendorf Reformed Church and co-chair of the HABGTF, held a ceremony at the Depot consecrating these remains so that they may be reinterred at the future Burial Ground memorial. Before any construction takes place, further archaeological evaluation of the site will take place under protocols specified by SHPO and LPC and supervised by the HABGTF.

Where are the artifacts and remains now?

The artifacts and remains are currently in a locked, climate-controlled storage space at Landmarks Preservation Commission's repository. LPC will keep the remains until a final resting place has been determined, likely at the future HABG memorial.

Is there an agreed upon protocol (MOU) between HABTF, EDC, LPC and SHPO on archaeology and handling of remains moving forward? How will this be codified in the RFP? What are the legal requirements?

A protocol was developed for the Phase 1B by the archeological consultant, AKRF in consultation with HABGTF, NYCEDC, LPC and SHPO. It is expected that a similar protocol will be used for future archeological study, ensuring that any and all additional human remains on the site are uncovered prior to construction, removed sensitively, and preserved.

The City completed an Environmental Impact Statement in 2017 and disclosed that there would be a requirement for further archaeological investigation prior to construction on the site. This future work and all related remedial measures must be conducted in consultation with LPC, SHPO and the HABGTF. This work will be required to be undertaken by any future developer through provisions in the contract of sale, long-term lease, or other legally binding agreement between any future developer and NYCEDC and/or the City.

VISION FOR THE SITE

How has the community engaged in planning for 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 Harlem African Burial Ground Task Force (HABGTF) and Bus Depot Task Force (BDTF) were formed with the goals of honoring the history of the site while leveraging this very large, vacant City-owned site to meet the needs expressed by the East Harlem community through affordable housing, open space, and commercial uses that generate jobs.

The HABGTF is co-chaired by former City Council Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito and Rev. Dr. Singletary. It is made up of a wide range of stakeholders, including scholars, clergy, concerned citizens, and experts in historic and cultural preservation. In 2011, CB11 designated the HABGTF as the entity representing the interest of the historic burial ground.

The BDTF is comprised of a group of community stakeholders that include Community Board 11, the HABGTF, and community-based organizations such as Operation Fightback, STRIVE, and CIVITAS, as well as elected officials including Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer and City agencies. It was tasked with developing goals for the redevelopment project, which were reflected in the eventual rezoning and associated City commitments.

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.

Where will the memorial be built, and how large will it be?

The memorial will preserve the known historic boundaries of the Harlem African Burial Ground, an area of approximately 18,000 square feet on southeastern area of the site. There will be no development within this footprint.

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

The foremost goal of this project is to achieve the dream of a permanent, public memorial to the history of the Burial Ground and the people who were buried there. The City is absolutely committed to making sure this happens. The City has committed to requiring that the redevelopment of the site will include a permanent outdoor memorial located approximately on the historical 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 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.

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 and up to 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 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.

What local hiring opportunities will be available for low-income residents as a result of this project?

It is expected that the economic impact of this project will be significant. In addition to jobs generated through construction, there will also be jobs generated by new businesses located in the development. While the type of commercial uses has not yet been determined, the City’s goal is to create quality jobs.

The City has committed to requiring that the eventual developer create a Targeted Hiring Outreach plan in accordance with HPD guidelines, participate in the HireNYC Construction Program, make a financial contribution to one or more job training programs in the City, and use best efforts to hit HireNYC’s Hiring, Retention, Advancement, and Training goals.

WHAT’S NEXT?

How will the City realize the vision of the Task Forces?

In 2019, NYCEDC anticipates releasing a Request for Expressions of Interest (RFEI) for a potential nonprofit operator for the future memorial and cultural center. The identification of this operator will be followed by a competitive procurement process through a Request for Proposals (RFP) to select a development team. The development team will work together with the operator to create a living memorial and cultural center in accordance with the mission and vision laid out by the HABGTF and build the larger project in line with the multiple public goals established by the Task Forces.

How will community engagement with the future developer be assured?

The City is committed to meaningful engagement with the Community Board before, during, and after the RFP process. Further, the business terms of a deal with a developer will require the approval of the Borough Board – a body that contains all the local elected officials in Manhattan.

How will the memorial be designed?

The process for the design for the outdoor memorial has yet to be determined. The Harlem African Burial Ground Task Force has worked closely with Lord Cultural Resources to develop an implementation plan for both components of the memorial (indoor and outdoor). As the project moves forward the future operator and developer will work with the Harlem African Burial Ground Task Force and the City to develop an appropriate public-engagement process around the planning and design of the outdoor component and indoor cultural center.