

# Former PS 90 Site [To be Renamed with the Task Force]

February 3rd, 2021 from 5:30-8p | Task Force Meeting #2 Notes

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## Agenda for the Meeting

### I. Meeting Summary

Task Force Meeting #2 was held on Wednesday, February 3rd in the evening from 5:30-8p. The meeting provided the opportunity to clarify the site's archaeological findings, history, and the ongoing descendant community research. In addition, we held meaningful discussions on honoring the historical significance of the site, the archeological findings, and the descendant community. The meeting included presentations, Q&A, breakout discussions, and group reflections. 12 Task Force Members along with 10 City Agency staff and 5 Consultants were in attendance. The meeting was recorded on Zoom and made accessible to the public via Livestream.

### II. Site History Presentation

HPI presented on the site's history and prior archaeological investigations on the former PS 90 site. This presentation built on the first Task Force Meeting's site history presentation and provided a deeper explanation on the information previously presented. New primary documentary research, discovered in 2020, was shared that confirmed the presence of an African burial ground site in the mid-nineteenth century that was located at the northeastern corner of the former PS 90 site and predominantly extending into what is now the current roadbed of Church Avenue. The presentation included an overview of the recoveries analysis and what DNA testing could reveal. Lastly, HPI presented on their ongoing descendant research to help identify potential descendants of the ancestors originally interred at the African Burial Ground and a growing research database to help support that work.

Following HPI's presentation, the Task Force reflected on this new information and engaged in a question and answer session with HPI and the broader project team. HPI's presentation has been attached in the post-meeting email. The presentation can also be viewed by accessing the YouTube Livestream link on the PS 90 Website.

### III. Discussion Reflections: Visioning How to Honor the Site

*Building on the Site History Presentation by HPI, Task Force members were provided time to talk through what they heard in more details and their initial thoughts and vision for honoring the site. TYTHEdesign facilitated the conversation by asking: how is this an opportunity to honor the historical importance of the site and show reverence to enslaved Africans buried on or near it?*

The following is a summary of themes to come out of those discussions. These themes are not in any particular order, and they reflect all points shared during the breakout rooms and group share back.

Key themes for visions regarding honoring the site:

### **Acknowledging the Full History**

- Learning from other institutions that focus on African American and Caribbean-American history. Honoring enslaved Africans across the country (Detroit to Alabama) is key, in addition to recognizing and memorializing other cultures at different points in history.
- The Task Force should look at the history of formerly enslaved Africans repopulating Flatbush, such as the history found in the book *Tales of Old Flatbush*.
- To acknowledge the history and the contribution of the lives once connected to the site and tying that narrative to the history of Flatbush as a neighborhood.
- There needs to be an acknowledgement of the history and the current context. Communities of color are always the last to know when things are being developed.

### **Sacredness**

- The site should invoke a sense of sacredness at this location. Even if not emotionally, it could still catch someone's interest, and build their curiosity. Once you have captured their attention, give them a brief education on the history of enslaved Africans and their contributions to Flatbush.
- The space should be a sacred ground, and that is where this process should start and end. It should be a space that looks to pay reverence and acknowledgement.

### **Shifting the Narrative**

- It would be an opportunity to let the youth and the community know about the history of the site by disrupting the narrative around enslaved Africans here, to support youth education that shifts the narrative from shame to one of pride and resilience. "I would also want it to really be used to disrupt the narrative around enslaved Africans on this land, how we got here, and what that meant, and what that means as descendants of stolen Africans."

### **Respect**

- It is disconcerting and disturbing to hear the remains were held in an unmarked grave, and it is difficult to grapple with how that is normal protocol.
- There needs to be respect for this particular community that has been plagued with so much disrespect. Respect for the descendants and those who are here today. "I just believe that a big part of it has to do with respecting the past and respecting who's here at this time as well."
- It is important to under the disparities with housing and race in our process. The string of racism that gets pulled through housing policy in the United States in a way that then exacerbates racism pulled through health and wealth building disparities.

### **Youth and Education**

- Build an educational cultural institution (or space) that pays respect to the enslaved indigenous and African people that now rest there.
- This should be an educational space in lieu of housing to honor sacredness.
- This could be an opportunity to connect to the larger New York City story of enslaved Africans, the slave trade, the underground railroad and other important connections to the past and present communities.
- It is important to build awareness of the project, because a lot of people may not know what is going on at the site, or its history. Bring the community in and together through education.
- Communities of color are always the last to know about development, and do not have an opportunity to speak out their needs, making it that more important to build awareness and educate the community on the development.
- It is often not a part of education to learn about slavery that existed in the north, including Brooklyn and New York City. It would be great to provide this history.

- Young people must be engaged through this project, and they are looking for a different story in a way that engages and draws them in about history. Local students are building awareness of the site and indicate that they are going to begin looking at the site differently knowing this new history.

### Accessibility

- To support visibility, there should be multiple layers of accessibility. This could look like a memorial area within the building, in addition to the history on the façade or windows provide access to the sites history to people walking by and invites them inside. It is important to remember “we are standing on a place where people were once looking for freedom. The fact that this is a burial ground, we need to bring more awareness to them for the Flatbush neighborhood to learn.”
- To capture one’s attention. People should know what was discovered at the site that may be passing by. It can help to bring the community together and further build awareness. “Somebody who is passing by unknowingly, it should catch their interest, and then feed their curiosity and bring them along.”
- To have a visible indicator, such as a historical marker on the site with a brief description of what was here that would help people walking by to know what really occurred, depicting dark history in cathartic ways.
- To incorporate arts and culture involve local artists into artistic components to support the visibility and accessibility of the site.
- To ensure that the people who were buried at the site are represented and that people know about them and the history of this site, and to be transparent in the further research and analysis of historical archives related to the site that can also be accessible for anyone who wants to do a deeper study on the site. Inclusion for future information. As this is ongoing research, we should be able to add more research as discovered in the future.

### Renaming the Project

- Out of respect, the Task Force should be renamed in honor of those who were once at the site, instead of calling it the Former PS 90 Task Force, and the project should be renamed to something like “community descendant project.”
- To humanize those that we discuss through the project and give them a name, we should identify new terminology when referring to human remains.
- The act of renaming the project will lend itself to messaging respect. The name should lend itself to the actual descendant community who was there first. We should also honor them when making our recommendations. We should also understand the disrespect in this community we have seen in terms of what has been developed, and it is also about respect who is here presently at this time as well.

## IV. Regulations for the Sensitive Treatment of Human Remains Presentation

HPI presented on New York City and State requirements for the sensitive treatment of human remains. Beginning with an overview of the affiliated agencies (including the NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) and the NY State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO)), HPI provided the process for their review, as well as ethics, qualifications, and requirements for archeologists to be present at the site when excavation occurs in the future. HPI also gave an overview on the role that the Task Force and Descendant Community plays in setting recommendations for the sensitive treatment of human remains at the former PS 90 site.

Following HPI's presentation, the Task Force was invited to ask any questions they had to better support their understanding of the city and state regulations, in order to begin to understand how they may impact any future recommendations developed. HPI's presentation has been attached in the post-meeting email. The presentation can also be viewed by accessing the YouTube Livestream link on the PS 90 Website.

## V. Discussion Reflection: Building the Recommendations

*Building on the presentation by HPI, the Task Force was invited to talk through their initial reactions and wishes for the sensitive handling of human remains, if found at the site in the future. The facilitators started the conversation by asking: for future human remains uncovered, how do you (and your stakeholders) hope these are honored (in relation to this site)?*

*The following is a summary of themes to come out of those discussions. These themes are not in any particular order, and they reflect all points shared during the breakout rooms and group share back.*

Key themes for building the recommendations for the sensitive treatment of remains:

### Interment of Remains

- Incorporating the remains on site to support the sense of reverence. It makes people respect the space that much more. Good examples can be seen at the African burial ground in Lower Manhattan and the Schomburg Library in Harlem.
- Since the remains were found there, they should not be disturbed as a sign of respect. "I do not understand why the remains should be moved. This is where they were buried. After we move these remains, we are just not doing justice."
- Returning the remains to West Africa should be considered. "The right thing to do would be to return our ancestors to where they were stolen."

### Community Involvement

- It is important to ensure there is community awareness, and that they are a part of the process when remains are discovered at the site in the future. "It should be to make people aware because a lot of people probably won't even know what's going on... they could just pass by living their daily lives. So, it's best to let people know, this is what we discovered."
- "The idea that these projects are being put upon communities of color, as opposed to an empowering community of color to be involved in the projects. So, expand that circle of response, so the entire community can pay their respects, and honor their lives, and ensure that they're not alone if and when we find human remains."

### DNA Testing

- It would be powerful to be able to tell the story of who these enslaved and freed Africans were and where they came from through DNA analysis. By collecting DNA, we may end up finding additional information about the actual descendants that becomes traceable and build upon the existing history. We can also connect to other African burial grounds across New York. "DNA testing has also become a tool in the stolen Africans toolkit of really trying to put together the puzzle pieces."
- Regardless of the price, testing should not be a question, and be required and included in this project RFP as long as the DNA analysis does not disturb or destroy the remains.
- "More information is always better."
- DNA testing can support the ongoing research. "You might end up finding some more information about these people that they may actually have actual descendants that you can trace back to, with this information."

### Ceremonies

- There should be an official ceremony for the community. "A funeral is a sacred right. So, I am just thinking that's going to be a community builder and educate the community as well."
- A practitioner of traditional African spirituality could perform a ceremony similar to a babalao and consider reaching out to an Imam to support multiple prayers, honoring the local community traditions.
- Consider creating a Clergy Task Force to support ceremonies on the site in the future.
- Allow the ceremony to go beyond the spiritual community to expand the circle of response, so that the entire community can pay their respects, recognitions and honor the descendants' lives. Make sure the entire community is engaged in the ceremony.

## History and Reflection

- It is important to keep in mind that the history of people of African descent comes with trauma and scars that people may want to separate themselves from.
- “There is a disconnect, where for anyone who is not of African descent, when you are asking your parents or grandparents about your history you are not talking about slavery. However, with people of African descent, somehow slavery is a mix of that.”
- Connect with Father Hamblin from St. Paul’s Church who is very community oriented. The church itself includes stained glass paintings and windows of historical people from Flatbush. He may have history we can connect to.

## Alternative Terms for “Remains”

- To change the narrative by changing our language, consider “ancestors” or “descendants” as alternative terms to “remains” moving forward with the project.
- The language we use will inform the outcome at which we have arrived at, and if we are not taking suggestions for how to move the process forward, then it may whittle away at the confidence we have in the outcome.

## VI. Questions and Answers

*During the meeting, Task Force members raised the following questions. The answers are a summary of what was shared through discussion and Zoom Chat by the City Team. These are in-person responses that are for information purposed only and are not written in any particular order.*

### **Q: How far in advance of these meetings will we try to get some of the local schools involved?**

Connecting with local schools is an important part of the broader engagement plan that we will co-design in the next Task Force meeting. This project and the Task Force engagement process represents a great opportunity to engage with local youths and educational institutions both in driving recommendations for the future of the site and developing a relationship with the future memorial and youth community space. The Task Force includes two representatives from the nearby Erasmus Campus – both a teacher and parent coordinator. We have also been in touch with the principals of the schools on the campus to coordinate further as they are adjacent to the site and welcome to working with other nearby educational institutions.

### **Q: What does the taskforce see as the end goal for gathering the community’s input? Will it try to build consensus on specific recommendations? How do we manage the expectation of community members who would like to add to the committee community perspective?**

The Task Force is instrumental in co-designing the process to engage the public as local leaders in the community. The public will play a vital role in this process and provide input throughout the process to inform the recommendations. Part of TYTHEdesign’s role is to take all of the information shared through the wider community engagement process (i.e. public workshops and community questionnaire) and identify all of the opportunities and provide a feedback loop to the Task Force of these ideas. The Task Force is encouraged to attend and even play an active role in the public workshops. Notwithstanding their attendance, TYTHEdesign and the City team will bring all of the ideas generated by the public and the Task Force together before final recommendations are created by the Task Force.

### **Q: During the time of when the school was built, is it possible that the builders of PS 90 disturbed the burial ground? Could that be why remains were found in those areas/pockets and why some remains were found outside of the boundaries shown on the 1855 map?**

Yes, it is possible that when the former PS 90 school building was constructed in 1878, there may have been burials that were disturbed, but we do not yet have concrete evidence of this. No newspaper accounts or other records have been found citing that burials were encountered at that time. Archaeological testing conducted in the early 2000s may indicate that burials in the footprint of the school or below the street and/or sidewalk were disturbed. Further, there were historic reports of burials having been encountered and

disturbed when the Flatbush Village School No. 1 was erected immediately north of the former PS 90 in 1842. Any of these scenarios could have resulted in the archaeological findings.

**Q: What type of burial did these ancestors have?**

The African Burial Ground in lower Manhattan, which is likely contemporaneous, found that the majority of burials were oriented east to west, in an extended supine position, with heads to the west. Individuals were in coffins and shrouded, and where more than one person was in a grave, each had their own coffin.

**Q: Is there documentation of those that were buried at the cemetery/burial ground on Flatbush and Church Avenue one block away from this site? Were enslaved people buried there? Do we know if the cemetery on Church Avenue was for people of European descent and that the cemetery for people of African descent was at the current site?**

The Flatbush Reformed Dutch Church (aka Flatbush Reformed Church or FRC) cemetery is a block to the west of the established location of the African Burial Ground (“Negro Burial Ground”) as it was mapped in 1855. Primarily, people of European descent who were members of the FRC were buried there and the FRC has records of burials. A 1913 recordation of 397 headstone inscriptions reported only three enslaved people buried there.

At different times through the colonial and post-Revolutionary War period laws were put into effect that dictated burial practices and restricted where people of African descent could be buried. Due to these restrictions, it was often common for a separate burial ground to be established for the Black community, as observed in Manhattan, Brooklyn, Staten Island, the Bronx and elsewhere. This is what happened in Flatbush. HPI has reviewed available FRC records and has not yet found a date as to when the African Burial Ground was established. Research is continuing.

**Q: Are current DNA tests destructive to samples?**

There are now nondestructive techniques to study DNA. The technique’s success depends, in part, on what is found and the conditions under which it is found. Nondestructive testing is the preferred approach as a first step to attempt DNA analysis. If unsuccessful, minimally destructive techniques can also be used if the Descendant Community chooses. The success rates of nondestructive techniques are improving with time.

**Q: What does this type of DNA testing tell you?**

DNA testing can tell you about ancestry, and, more specifically, where a person is originally from. If you find intact DNA, you also may be able to establish other information such as diet, where a person grew up, and what their environment was like at that time. It also has the potential to establish sex and age at death. Advances in the breadth and depth of questions that can be answered are being made in the field of DNA analysis.

**Q: Who are the descendant communities?**

The Descendant Community are either kin of the deceased or can be self-identified people with a vested interest in serving as the voice of those interred. Often, the Descendant Community includes community members who are interested in continuing research and/or working together to:

- establish a preferred course of action for the respectful treatment, examination, and reinterment of humans should they be found;
- establish goals for future memorialization; and,
- find ways to honor and remember an abandoned past.

In this way, Task Force members are part of this effort, which may come to include others as they are identified through further descendant research and outreach.

**Q: Can you clarify how descendants would be identified?**

There are several steps planned for the near future to identify biological descendants (direct kin) including advertising in genealogical websites (e.g., ancestry.com, familysearch.com, etc.), local newspapers, and other locations that the Task Force recommends. Advertising is directed at seeking individuals who know that their

ancestors were enslaved in or lived in Flatbush prior to the 1840s. If direct kin are not identified, members of the Task Force and greater Flatbush community will continue to serve as the collective Descendant Community.

**Q: Will workers be actively looking for burials and/or human remains given this knowledge?**

Before any construction can take place on the former PS 90 site, an Unanticipated Discoveries Protocol must be submitted to and approved by the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC). Once the Unanticipated Discoveries Protocol is in place, professional archaeological testing and continued searching for any burials and/or human skeletal material is required by New York City and State laws. According to law, when human remains are found work must cease and the Police and Medical Examiner must be contacted to investigate the site. Assuming the discovery is not of forensic interest, the Department of Health must then issue a disinterment permit which only a funeral director may apply for.

**Q: Will remains be photographed and documented at the location where they are found before they are moved? Will there be thorough documentation?**

An archaeological testing protocol (Protocol) must be submitted to and approved by LPC before any below-ground archaeological testing can be undertaken. The Protocol will spell out the exact procedures to photograph and thoroughly document all burials and/or disarticulated human skeletal material should they be found at the site. With input from the Task Force and Descendant Community, it will also describe the exact procedures for their disinterment, analysis, and reinterment should human bones or teeth be found. The highest level of care, respect, and professional standards would be enacted.

**VII. Next Steps**

To close the meeting, TYTHEdesign presented the following next steps and expectations for the Task Force. **The next meeting will be held on Wednesday February 24<sup>th</sup> from 5:30-8:00p.** The next meeting will include meaningful discussions on memorialization precedents and potential recommendations and include time to co-design the project's public engagement approach, to ensure the process is inclusive and accessible.

**VII. Attendance**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Organizational Affiliation</b>
Ryan Lynch	Office of Brooklyn Borough President Eric Adams
Roslyn Joinvil	Office of District 40 Council Member
Carol Reneau	Community Board 17
Shawn Campbell	Community Board 14
Lauren Collins	Flatbush Ave. BID & Church Avenue BID
Samantha Bernardine	Erasmus Hall High School for Youth and Community Development
Ron Schweiger	Brooklyn Borough Historian
Natiba Guy-Clement	Center for Brooklyn History at Brooklyn Public Library
Tyrone McDonald	Neighborhood Housing Services of Brooklyn CDC Inc. (NHS Brooklyn)
Naima Oyo	Ifetayo Cultural Arts Academy
Dr. Ben Talton	Author and Professor of African History from Temple University
Kathy De Meij	CAMBA
<b>New York City Agencies + Task Force Technical Advisors</b>	
Eleni DeSiervo	NYC Economic Development Corporation (EDC)
Aileen Gorsuch	NYC Economic Development Corporation (EDC)

Monique Woods	NYC Economic Development Corporation (EDC)
Julianne Herskowitz	NYC Economic Development Corporation (EDC)
Perris Straughter	New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD)
Josh Saal	New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD)
Uriah Johnson	New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD)
Erin Buchanan	New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD)
Timothy Frye	New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC)
Amanda Sutphin	New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC)
Cece Saunders	Historical Perspectives, Inc (HPI)
Faline Schneiderman	Historical Perspectives, Inc (HPI)
Kristina Drury	TYTHEdesign
Claudie Mabry	TYTHEdesign
Hillary Clark	TYTHEdesign
John Lepore	TYTHEdesign