

Flatbush Avenue Burial Ground Remembrance and Redevelopment Task Force
May 5th, 2021 - Community Workshop #1

Q&A

During the meeting, the attendees raised the following questions through the Zoom CHAT function. The answers are a summary of what was shared through discussion by the City Team. These are in-person responses that are for informational purposes only and are not written in any particular order.

Q: Archaeological work in the schoolyard in 2000 produced fragments of a human mandible, as well as four human teeth. Why did HPI's position change from the 2001 study, which "recommends the avoidance of any further subsurface disturbance to the site"?

HPI's recommendations have not changed over time. It is best practice to leave burials in place, but other factors must be considered as well by the City, project planners, and the community writ large as to how the site could best serve the needs and interests of the community.

Q: Are plans for archaeological procedures only required if the site is developed? Why must the site be disturbed?

Yes, archaeology is only mandated if development occurs and decisions about what development may or may not happen is made by the City, project planners, and the community. The City and co-chairs of the Task Force have identified the need for affordable housing and youth services in the community; a future affordable housing project would fulfill these needs while seeking to respectfully honor the sacredness and sensitive history of the site through the appropriate handling of human remains, if discovered in the future, and memorialization of the site's history as guided by the Task Force and community.

Q: How long will the development be paused if remains are found in the future?

If human remains are found in the future, any construction work stops immediately, and will not resume until the required notifications are made, as described in the Archaeological protocol, and permits are issued by the Department of Health and the Office of the City Medical Examiner. This can take anywhere from a few days to a few weeks.

Q: Is it confirmed that the site targeted for development does include part of the African Burial Ground? Is there a level of doubt?

Evidence suggests that the boundaries of the burial ground extended into the northeast corner of the site. Archaeologist Elizabeth Mead used a geographic information system (GIS) mapping tool to overlay the cemetery's boundaries as they were presented on the 1855 map on a modern map, indicating that the burial group extended into the site. It should be noted that the 1855 map may not have shown the full extent of the burial ground as it was used through time, so it is possible that more of the site may once have included the burial ground.

Q: Why were the human remains found in 2001 moved to the Flatbush Reformed Church?

The New York City School Construction Authority, on behalf of the City, oversaw the archaeological investigations in the early 2000s as the site was then in operation as a public school (former PS 90) and were responsible for the project that occurred. Since the land was originally owned by the Reformed Church of Flatbush, the City decided to return the human remains to the cemetery maintained and owned by them. The human remains were buried in a consecration ceremony led by Reverend Daniel Ramm, who was at the Church at that time.

Q: Were white Flatbush residents who were not members of the Dutch Reformed Church allowed burial in their church burial ground at the time in question?

Probably not, as burial was generally reserved for church members, but this is not a topic that has been researched as part of this project.

Q: Which Indigenous tribe(s) once lived in this section of Brooklyn?

The Native Americans in the area were ancestors of today's Delaware Nation, Delaware Tribe of Indians, Stockbridge-Munsee Community Band of Mohicans, and the Shinnecock Nation. At the time of European contact, these were members of the Canarsie, a band of Munsee-speaking Lenape.

Q: Could the urban archeological dig provide opportunities for educational projects and review for the community's students?

Further archaeological investigation on the site could certainly provide educational opportunity for community youth. Such a decision should be informed and recommended by the descendant community and Task Force, if there is interest.

Q: Are the majority of the ancestral remains likely actually in the middle of the intersection? Does that imply that they have all already been disturbed? What would a process be like of turning the whole intersection into a memorial green space?

Review of historical documents suggests that when Bedford Avenue was laid out in the 1860s, human remains were discovered and were disinterred and reburied on land owned by the Flatbush Reformed Dutch Church near Holy Cross Cemetery. We do not know for certain the extent of the burial ground or how intact the subsurface conditions are in the intersection. This has not been confirmed through archaeological testing. HPD will work with NYCDOT and other agencies to explore if any future memorialization can extend beyond the site's boundaries and into the street intersection.

Q: Does the Flatbush Reformed Church have the technical means to maintain the ancestral remains?

Yes, to the best of my knowledge and my conversations with Reverend Daniel Ramm, who was at the church in 2001, the discovered human remains were buried in their cemetery and are located in a consecrated grave, which has not been nor will be disturbed.

Q: How might outreach to religious/spiritual communities develop (both traditional and contemporary) to support the memorialization of these people?

The Task Force membership includes representatives from two separate local religious institutions – Reverend Awkward of the Reformed Dutch Church and Reverend Hamblin of St. Paul’s Episcopal Church. Both churches have been involved with helping to uncover the history of the site and the potential descendants who were buried at the African Burial Ground. Part of the Task Force process will make recommendations on future memorialization at the site; this may include engaging the religious/spiritual community to bless or consecrate a reburial ceremony as has been done at other African burial grounds in NYC and elsewhere.

Q: How are you researching the culture and faith of these people who were buried there in an attempt to know how they would want their remains to be cared for?

Little is known about the layout and condition of the burial ground when it was active, such as if it included headstones. This is not one of the intentions of the documentary research at this time, but that's a very good suggestion that could be added to future research.

Q: How often have African burial grounds discovered in NYC been memorialized by being left undisturbed?

There are several examples in NYC where an African burial ground was left either partially or wholly undisturbed. There's one at Drake Park in Hunts Point in the Bronx, which was already a park, yet later was identified as being a former African burial ground. Research was completed about five years ago, and there's a website that talks about the history of that site. The other site is Sankofa Park, which is in New Lots in Brooklyn. It is also a park, and memorialization is currently part of the discussion there. The federal African burial ground in Lower Manhattan at 290 Broadway has a portion of the site which was left undisturbed where the memorial is located, and a portion of the site which was developed with an office tower.

Q: Other than the 1855 map, do we have any sense of how large the cemetery was and how many people were interred? Have historians done any work on this?

Historical Perspectives Inc (HPI) has a team of historians, who have done research alongside the archaeologists. The question of the extents of the historical African Burial Ground has been a key issue that we've been attempting to answer since our involvement at the site in 1998, and is core to our ongoing research today. The documentary records are very thin, because many of them resided with the Flatbush Reformed Church and were lost in a church fire. We have continued to research documents regarding the original village of Flatbush and the reading of deeds, when there were transfers between the church and the village with regard to the site, when the first school was established in 1842, and later with the transfer of lands from the church to the Van Dyke family, whose house was constructed in the 1860s within the burial ground’s known boundaries. Unfortunately, no information regarding the number of people interred at the burial ground or the full extents of the cemetery (beyond the 1855 map) are known.

Q: How can community members, who are largely descendants of enslaved Africans, get involved in this process, beyond the Zoom meetings?

Community members can submit input online at <https://fabgtaskforce.nyc/get-involved#contact> or via email (info@fabgtaskforce.nyc and FABGRR@hpd.nyc.gov), as well as host small group discussions to collect additional feedback.

Q: Can you provide the websites you mentioned and the names of the other African Burial Grounds mentioned?

Yes, there are other African Burial Grounds in New York City including the Federal African Burial Ground at 290 Broadway (<https://www.nps.gov/afbg/index.htm>), the Hunts Point Burial Ground in the Bronx (<https://hpsbg.weebly.com>) and the burial ground in Sankofa Park in Brooklyn. The LPC website has archaeological reports about these sites (<https://www1.nyc.gov/site/lpc/about/archaeology-reports.page>).

Q: At the Civic Center African Burial Ground, construction was known to have broken up intact burials of the hundreds being moved. Why would this be risked here?

The Federal African Burial Ground project uncovered more than 400 burials which were archaeologically disinterred, analyzed, and then subsequently reinterred at the site. Today, there is a National Monument to commemorate the site and for more information please see: <https://www.nps.gov/articles/afamburial.htm> The federal agency overseeing the project did not stop after burials were initially found to reconsider the project and solicit the input of the public. It is hoped that the public process now underway about how to honor the people who were buried at this site will be a much better and more transparent process.

Q: Why is it being considered to build over this African Burial Ground and expect the enslaved population to have documented detailed maps and name/locations of their burials to hold historical value?

Council Member Eugene working with the City of New York identified a need for affordable housing and youth services in this community, which would be fulfilled through a future project on the site. The history of this site and this community will be appropriately commemorated through a future memorial on the site, so that the public will understand the significance of this site. This site has historical value, and its importance is not measured by the availability of records. Further historical information is being sought to help expand on the known history of the site, to learn more about the people who were interred at the site, and to ensure that as many relevant records that represent the enslaved people of Flatbush are shared with the community. This research is being conducted by Historical Perspectives, the archaeologist for the project, in addition to trying to identify a descendant community who may have more information to share about who was buried at the site.

Q: Was there any public notification of the 2001 transaction of the human remains to the Dutch Church? Simply, was the community informed at the time?

To the best of our knowledge, the New York City School Construction Authority and City did not engage in outreach at that time.

Q: What efforts is the city doing to maintain the dignity of the site as the discussion process continues? There is illegal dumping at the site.

HPD is in contact with other City agencies regarding ongoing maintenance. If there is any illegal dumping, community members should report this to 311.

Q: Has the land under the private site with the permitted 4 story building been surveyed?

It has not. The property is not a NYC Landmark and since the proposed building meets all local zoning requirements, it would not prompt an archaeological analysis.

Q: If the ancestors' living relatives are successfully located, should the living relatives be the ones who make the decisions about the site and handling of human remains?

Yes, if the descendant community is located, they will be notified and asked to participate in decisions regarding the sensitive treatment of any human remains that may be discovered in the future on the site.

Q: What religious rites should happen given the uncertainty of who was interred?

Recognizing the diversity of African cultures represented by enslaved people, and the conversion of many to Christianity, a multitude of representative rites may be appropriate. This is an important issue to which further study and more thought should be given. The Task Force, descendant community, and general public will further weigh in on how the site should be commemorated and honored.

Q: Why are the two co-chairs, who are elected officials, not present at this forum?

Borough President Adams and Council Member Eugene have assigned committed staff members to represent them on the Task Force. In some instances, the Co-Chairs have personally attended the live-streamed Task Force meetings. Both have been proactive advocates and co-designers in this planning process. At the start of public workshop #1, Borough President Adam's representative provided remarks welcoming community participants in this discussion. We anticipate that the Co-Chairs will have representatives at the next workshop as well. The public workshops are meant to create a space to receive and address public feedback.

Q: Why is commenting not possible for community members tuning into the Task Force Meetings livestreams?

The suggestion to livestream meetings came from members of the Task Force who felt that it was important that the discussions be transparent. Notes from the meetings and materials are posted online. Members of the community are encouraged to send input via email or the comment section so that their feedback can be incorporated into the planning process. Task Force members were invited by the Co-Chairs as representatives based on areas of expertise and their ability to share information with the community. Community members are encouraged to provide feedback via the website and email. If a community member is interested in meeting, a small group or one-on-one discussion could be

arranged. All input will be analyzed and incorporated into the planning process. The goal for the public workshops is to share information about the in-depth analysis to-date and collect input from the public.

Q: What outreach has been done? Far more is needed than just zoom such as “on the ground” outreach to churches and schools and lots of flyers as many community members do not have internet access.

HPD worked with various community partners such as the Community Board, local elected officials and local organizations, many of which are represented on the Task Force, to spread the word about the community workshop and questionnaire. This outreach has included in-person flyering as well as distributing materials in English, Spanish and Haitian Creole through local churches and community centers. While we strive to get a broad and representative population to participate, we understand that some people may not be able to attend public meetings that are held virtually at this time due to covid. As such, community members can also participate through a questionnaire. This questionnaire is currently available [online](#), and, furthermore, we are exploring whether paper versions can also be submitted through one of our neighborhood partners.