

# Joseph Rodman Drake Park and Enslaved People's Burial Ground

**Oak Point Avenue, Drake Park South, Longfellow Avenue, and Hunts Point Avenue  
Borough of the Bronx  
Tax Map Block 2772 Lot 170**

**Built:** c. 1720-1864; c. 1910-1953

**Proposed Action:** Calendared, August 15, 2023; Heard November 14, 2023;  
Propose for designation December 12, 2023



Joseph Rodman Drake Park and Enslaved People's Burial Ground, LPC, 2023



Located in the Hunts Point neighborhood of the Bronx, Joseph Rodman Drake Park and Enslaved People's Burial Ground is a New York City Park containing two colonial-era cemeteries within its bounds: the Hunt-Willett-Leggett Cemetery for those descended from, and associated with, these three early settler families; and an enslaved people's cemetery, for those forced to labor for these families. These cemeteries faced each other across the old Hunts Point Road, which was demapped and buried during the building of Drake Park c. 1910. The survival of this once-typical spatial arrangement—with the enslaved people's burial ground close to, but separate from, that of their enslavers—in a public place is remarkable in New York City, providing an important window into an underrecognized history. This proposed designation would memorialize enslaved people who were central to the area's early history, recognize the site's colonial-era history and establishment as a park in the early 20th century, and protect the historic physical features of both cemeteries, including burials and below-ground archaeological resources.

Prior to European contact, Hunts Point was the home of the Munsee-speaking Siwanoy people, who were displaced following the 1663 “sale” of the area to English settlers. During the 1700s, the Hunt, Willett, and Leggett families came to dominate the area. By the 1720s, a cemetery was established on Hunt family land on the north side of Hunts Point Road in which members of all three families would be buried. At least one of these families enslaved people of both African and Indigenous descent. Among the known enslavers buried in the Hunt-Willett-Leggett Cemetery are Cornelius and Elizabeth Willett, who enslaved 12 people at the time of Cornelius' death in 1781, and Thomas Hunt, a Revolutionary War hero who enslaved ten people in 1790. Both were likely among the largest enslavers of the time in Westchester County. The cemetery's most famous grave is that of poet and Hunt relative Joseph Rodman Drake, who died in 1820. Drake Park was created specifically to preserve his grave and the Hunt-Willett-Leggett Cemetery from Hunts Point's early-20<sup>th</sup>-century urban development; this cemetery remains the park's dominant visual feature today.

It is likely that the enslaved people's cemetery just to its south was also established by the early 1700s. Unlike the burials in the Hunt-Willett-Leggett Cemetery, those in the enslaved people's cemetery are anonymous; no visible markers remain, and no records documenting their names or burials have been found. The visual absence of the enslaved people's burial ground in the landscape of Drake Park results from the removal or burial of its markers sometime after the park's opening. In 1913, the enslaved people's cemetery was still said to contain “a good many irregular shaped headstones,” which apparently survived in place at least until 1920.

After 1920, published references to the enslaved people's burial ground stopped appearing, and it was largely forgotten until new research in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century led to a state grant funding a professional archeological study that engaged nearby public school students in its research. The study included a ground-penetrating radar survey that found four likely human burials in the section of the park identified as the enslaved people's burial ground, south of a park pathway separating it from the Hunt-Willett-Leggett Cemetery as the old Hunts Point Road once did. The study also identified the potential for archaeological resources associated with a c. 1864 wood-frame house adjacent to the eastern perimeter of the Hunt-Willett-Leggett Cemetery.

Drake Park's design and appearance have changed since its early years. The current system of pathways, including the path between the two cemeteries, is likely the result of a 1952-53 renovation. As the park has evolved over time, so has its meaning. Reflecting new research and community input, the park was renamed Joseph Rodman Drake Park and Enslaved African Burial Ground in 2021. The Landmarks Preservation Commission's name for the site builds upon additional research to be more inclusive and reflects the documented enslavement of Indigenous people by the Leggett family, and their likely burial here alongside people of African descent. Originally created to commemorate Drake and the area's colonial-era landowners, this site now recognizes enslaved people whose history in the area, and final resting place within the park, long went unrecognized, and remains a tangible reminder of the centrality of enslaved people to the early history of the Bronx and New York City.

