

Joseph Rodman Drake Park and Enslaved African 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; Public Hearing November 14, 2023



Joseph Rodman Drake Park and Enslaved African Burial Ground, LPC, 2023

Located in the Hunts Point neighborhood of the Bronx, Joseph Rodman Drake Park and Enslaved African Burial Ground memorializes the enslaved people who were central to the area's early history. Opened in 1910, Drake Park contains two colonial-era cemeteries within its bounds: the Hunt-Willett-Leggett Cemetery, for those descended from the area's early settler families; and the enslaved people's cemetery, for those enslaved by these families prior to 1827, when the practice was abolished in New York. These cemeteries faced each other across Hunts Point Road, a former Indigenous trail and 18th- and 19th-century cartway that was demapped and buried during the building of Drake Park.

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, the Hunts established a family cemetery on the north side of Hunts Point Road in which members of all three families would be buried. These families enslaved people of both African and Indigenous descent; several known enslavers are buried in the Hunt-Willett-Leggett Cemetery, including Thomas Hunt, who enslaved ten people in 1790. The cemetery's most famous grave is that of poet and Hunt family friend Joseph Rodman Drake. When he died in 1820, the Hunts honored his wish to be buried here, by his beloved Bronx River. Drake Park was created specifically to preserve his grave and the Hunt-Willett-Leggett Cemetery from Hunts Point's early-20th-century urban development; surrounded by an iron fence, it 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 18th century. Both New York City and Westchester County, which Hunts Point was then part of, were slavery strongholds, with Westchester containing several large agricultural "plantations." 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. They may include the few enslaved people whose names have come down through official records, such as Mingo and Sarah, mentioned in a 1694 will; and Abram, Titus, Tobe, Lille, and Gin, who were identified in the Hunts' household in 1755.

The visual absence of the enslaved people's burial ground in the landscape of Drake Park results from the removal 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. These markers were documented in an early-20th-century photograph in the collections of the Museum of the City of New York labeled "Slave Burying Ground Hunts Point Road."

After 1920, published references to the enslaved people's burial ground stopped appearing and its headstones were removed. It was essentially forgotten until about a decade ago, when new research led to a state grant funding a professional archeological study that engaged local schoolchildren in its research. The study included a ground-penetrating radar survey finding 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 Hunts Point Road once did. It is possible that other burials in the enslaved people's cemetery were exhumed and reinterred after 1920 under a cluster of roughly worked fieldstones in the Hunt-Willett-Cemetery; research into this is ongoing.

Drake Park's design and appearance have changed since its early years. The current system of pathways, including the path between the two cemeteries, took shape by the mid-1950s. 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. At the time, Parks' Bronx Commissioner, Iris Rodriguez-Rosa, expressed "hope that these new signs, which honor the enslaved ... will spur reflection, remembrance, and pursuit for greater knowledge and understanding for all who visit the park." Given the likely burial of both African and Indigenous enslaved people here, research associated with this proposed designation may lead to a more inclusive proposed landmark name. 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. It remains a tangible reminder of the centrality of enslaved people to the early history of the Bronx and New York City.

