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A gravestone at Drake Park. Photo: Shehzi Zahid

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FUNDS EARMARKED FOR DRAKE PARK SLAVE BURIAL GROUND ARE

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UNACCOUNTED FOR

By Shehzil Zahid () / December 26, 2019



(<http://huntspointexpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/image1.jpeg>)

A gravestone at Drake Park. Photo: Shehzil Zahid

Justin Czarka, a school teacher at Public School 48 on Spofford Avenue, reached into a fanny pack under his winter jacket and pulled out a ring of keys. Thumbing through them, he selected one and twisted it into the thick lock. The key jammed—once, twice—before giving way.

“The caretaker for the park gave us a key when all this started,” said Czarka, pushing open the gate into the cemetery at Drake Park (<https://www.nycgovparks.org/parks/joseph-rodman-drake-park>). Under the ground lie the remains of Hunts Point’s landowning families from the 1800s, the Drakes, Leggetts, Willetts and the Hunts.

Their slaves lie buried under trees outside the gate.

For years, plans to memorialize the burial ground where the slaves were laid to rest have been in limbo. Since 2014, Czarka and Phillip Panaritis, a retired official with the New York City Department of Education, have worked with PS 48 students to research the history of the site with the intention of memorializing the grounds and the forgotten ones buried below.

At first there was a flurry of fanfare, with the preteen students who had helped conduct the initial research in the spotlight. In 2014, then-State Sen. Jeffrey Klein held a press conference (<http://huntspointexpress.com/2014/01/24/students-uncover-secret-of-drake-par/>) at the park, promising an \$180,000 investment to memorialize the site.

But five years later, both the State Senate Finance Committee and the city parks department say they have no record of ever receiving a legislative intent form from either Klein or his successor, State Sen. Alessandra Biaggi. Without that documentation the state senate cannot follow through.

A spokesman for Biaggi’s office said that her office has been told by the State Finance committee that no evidence of allocated funds could be found. The process cannot start without a legislative intent form. According to the spokesperson, “The money has been reallocated by the Senate Majority and can still be utilized. Our office will be reaching out to NYC Parks and Recreation this week to see if they still want to access the funds.”

A spokesman for the parks department said that Parks never received the necessary documentation either, and a final consensus was never reached on what the funds should be earmarked for, in the event they are ever transferred to parks.

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In a phone interview, however, Klein, who now works for Mercury, a public strategy firm, said that the funds were indeed earmarked for the burial ground, though he did not recall whether those funds were actually transferred.

News of the glitch came as a shock to the educators Panaritis and Czarka.

“I am horrified to learn about this apparent chicanery at the expense of poor schoolchildren and the oft-violated memory of hundreds of formerly forgotten enslaved African American men, women and children,” Panaritis wrote in an email to The Express.

Czarka said the confusion surrounding the funds reflects a larger sense of unaccountability that has plagued progress on the burial ground project. Despite community efforts to memorialize the site, such as collaborating with The Point CDC to draw up plans for it, little has been accomplished.

At the height of the burial ground news coverage five years ago, Czarka and his students advocated for benches, trash cans and an amphitheater, to help inject some life into the moribund park while memorializing the forgotten slaves.

“I don’t know if there’s a yearning to have a memorial,” Czarka said. “Perhaps people just don’t care for what that means for society and our history. Should we care that there’s people under the ground that nobody cared about?”

This story was updated on Jan. 7.

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