

Bronx students uncover slave burial ground in Hunts Point



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Reporter



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HUNTS POINT, The Bronx (PIX11) — It's a discovery so rare that it happens once in centuries, but a group of elementary school students helped to do it. Not only did they discover a long forgotten African American slave burial ground, but on Friday, they received help from the state of New York to preserve their findings — help in the amount of nearly \$200,000.

Also remarkable is the location of what is soon to be designated a city landmark. The burial ground is in Hunts Point, a place that tends to be associated more with industrial buildings, tractor trailers, and heavy police patrols in order to put a lid on the red light trade for which the area has gained a reputation over time.

But just past a Hunts Point auto wrecking yard is P.S. 48, and some of the students at the elementary school have in recent years spent some very important time in a park three blocks from their campus.



The students received \$180,000 to preserve the site.

“He knew,” said Panaritis’s friend and P.S. 48 teacher Justin Czarka, about how Panaritis immediately sent a copy of the photo to him after seeing it for the first time. “He knew right away that I would be

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Joseph Rodman Drake Park is a one-block oasis of green in the middle of the largely industrial part of the neighborhood, and in the middle of the park is an historic cemetery. A couple of years ago, Department of Education historian Philip Panaritis came across a photo of other graves, listed by the Museum of the City of New York only as being “in the Bronx.”

“[It was] an abandoned African American cemetery that no one knew was here,” Panaritis said.

fascinated by it.”

Czarka teaches newly immigrated third through fifth grade students, whom he put to work immediately. They gathered maps and other documents, and pored over them.

“We look at the same thing every day,” said student Emanuel Matos, “but we still find something new.”

With the help of teachers and administrators, the students learned that the rich, white, historic Bronx families whose tombstones are still in the park, owned dozens of African American slaves, who had to be buried somewhere.

“They were able to look at [a] map and look at the topography,” said Czarka, pointing to the southwest corner of Joseph Rodman Drake Park, “and they were able to realize that somewhere in this area is where [the burial ground] must be at.”

Specifically, student Erlantz Beato, pointed that out to his teachers. The observation helped to lead to the arrival of technicians from the U.S. Department of Agriculture last September. They brought ground penetrating radar, which they used to analyze every square inch of the park.

When they had finished, the radar analysis revealed some very significant information. “Anthropogenic features,” the historian, Philip Panaritis said, “which are graves and skeletons.”

They were the bodies of a few dozen African American slaves, whose burial ground had been buried itself, as well as paved over and forgotten when the park was created about a hundred years ago.

On Friday morning, however, they were forgotten no longer. “A capital grant,” announced State Senator Jeffrey Klein, (D) Bronx / Westchester, at a mid-morning news conference, “that was in this year’s state budget for \$180,000” is what he ‘d applied for and secured.

“They’re going to fence off the area [of the park] we determined was the African burial ground,” said Klein. “There’ll be markers, we’re going to have a monument.”

Roxanne Cardona, the principal of P.S. 48, had shepherded the project from its inception, and even after two years of helping out, she said she still gets excited when she thinks about what her students have done.

“When you find history, and discover it yourself,” Cardona said, that’s what education is all about.

The whole thing has got the students involved, some of whom have been in the U.S. for only the last few months, excited about their accomplishments, and about learning more.

“I love investigation,” said student Genesis Monegro. “I love history, I love science, I love everything.”

The burial site will soon become a city landmark, but local residents and leaders, including State Sen. Klein, said they will now try to gain national landmark status for the African American burial ground, similar to the African Burial Ground in Lower Manhattan, which is administered by the National Park Service.