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South Bronx Students May Have Found Site of Slave Burial Ground



Fourth graders walk past Joseph Rodman Drake Park, where Public School 48 students found evidence of a slave burial ground.

SUZANNE DECHILLO / THE NEW YORK TIMES

By LISA W. FODERARO

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In a snow-covered park in the Hunts Point section of the South Bronx, an enclosed cemetery in the park's center evokes a much different neighborhood from the one now jammed with auto-glass shops and wholesale produce markets. Headstones engraved with "Hunt" and "Leggett" hark back to the 18th and 19th centuries, when prominent New York families had mansions in the still-rural Bronx.

But a group of students and teachers from nearby Public School 48 may have discovered another piece of New York City history at [Joseph Rodman Drake Park](#), one long forgotten: an African slave burial ground. Poring over census data, maps, photographs and wills, the students identified an area outside the handsome wrought-iron fence surrounding the cemetery as the likely site of the final resting place for scores of slaves.

Last September, a team of scientists from the United States

Department of Agriculture used ground-penetrating radar at the site and found “anthropogenic features,” suggestive of skeletal remains, about six feet beneath the parkland. On Friday, students and staff from P.S. 48 — which is also named for [Joseph Rodman Drake](#), a poet who lived from 1795 to 1820 — were joined at a news conference by state elected officials and community leaders to call on the state [Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation](#) to officially recognize the burial ground.

The investigation by the local elementary school began with a single black-and-white photograph from 1910 showing an overgrown landscape with several markers resembling headstones. On the back it was labeled, “Slave burying ground, Hunts Point Road.” It was brought to the attention of a teacher at P.S. 48, Justin Czarka, by Philip Panaritis, an official with the city’s Education Department who oversees a federally financed grant program for the Bronx called [Teaching American History](#)



The Rev. Kahli Mootoo on Friday called for state recognition for the site.

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“That was the initial spark for the project,” said Mr. Czarka, who teaches English as a second language and who led the research project with another teacher at the school, Grace Binuya. “Phil was going through archives from the Museum of the City of New York and came across that image, and he sent it to me and the principal. I had an ‘aha’ moment and thought this is a perfect opportunity for an authentic learning experience.”

According to old maps, Hunts Point Road, which no longer exists, ran along what became Drake Park. The city’s parks department took control of the land around the time the photograph was taken; the

new park was dedicated in 1915.

At the news conference, State Senator Jeffrey D. Klein, a Democrat who represents the Bronx and Westchester County, urged that the state grant the burial site official recognition. “For over 100 years, the sacred African slave burial ground in Drake Park has been treated as anything but — with grass, asphalt and dirt covering the historic remnants of slaves in this area,” Mr. Klein said.

“The lives of the men, women and children who rest in peace here are part of the history of not only the Hunts Point community, but of New York at large,” he added.



An old photo was labeled “slave burying ground.”

Dan Keefe, a spokesman for the state’s Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, said the agency would consider the site for listing on the State Register of Historic Places. “We do believe it is potentially a very important site and will be happy to review the information collected by P.S. 48,” he said.

Larry Scott Blackmon, the parks department’s deputy commissioner for community outreach, said that without an archaeological dig, the evidence was inconclusive that a slave

burial ground existed in the park itself. “The parks department does not dig up parkland unless there is a capital project scheduled,” he said.

But the department acknowledges that there was a burial ground in the “immediate area” and Mr. Blackmon said the agency would devise new signs for the park to reflect that history. “At the end of the day, we want to do right by the individuals who were buried there,” Mr. Blackmon said.