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# Honoring a Hidden Slave Burial Ground

By HELENE STAPINSKI NOV. 14, 2017

On a recent warm afternoon, a small park in the Hunts Point section of the Bronx was empty except for one visitor — a jazz trombonist named Johnnie Butler, sitting beneath a weeping willow, practicing “A Long Drink of the Blues.” Mr. Butler lives in the neighborhood, and this is his favorite spot to play. He’s often solo, since there’s not a lot of foot traffic around Joseph Rodman Drake Park, mostly trucks serving the heavy industry in the area. There aren’t even any benches, so Mr. Butler brings his own chair.

Though he didn’t realize it, Mr. Butler was not completely alone. Not far from him, four feet below, lay the remains of a number of African-American slaves from the 18th and 19th centuries.

“I had no idea,” said Mr. Butler, taking five and looking down at the grass. “Maybe that’s why I’m attracted to this spot.”

There is no marker, but nearby is a small cemetery — gated and locked — right in the middle of the 2.5-acre park with tombstones for the owners of those who toiled on their farms. Outside the white cemetery is a sign, revised in 2014, that mentions the slaves. “Here lie the nanny, coachman, farm laborer, wood cutter, drover, blacksmith, cook, groom, carpenter and seamstress whose unpaid labor contributed to Hunts Point’s large profitable estates.”

Philip Panaritis, the man who composed the sign — and who is largely responsible for discovering the slave burial ground in 2014 along with some local schoolchildren and teachers — has been pushing to have a separate monument

placed at the site, so that casual visitors like Mr. Butler will know the history that lies below.

“We need the Parks Department to O.K. a memorial,” said Mr. Panaritis, a retired official with the Department of Education. “And we’d like to see the burial ground put into the curriculum, not just of P.S. 48, but in other schools as well.”

Mr. Panaritis, who ran a D.O.E. project called Teaching American History, brought the burial ground to light after discovering a black-and-white photograph from 1910, showing gravestones amid a tangle of weeds, with the words “Slave burying ground, Hunts Point Road” written on the back. After further research, he discovered that as many as 44 slaves had lived in the area, according to 1800 census figures, with the last burial in the 1840s. In the early 20th century, because of road construction, the burial ground was graded, probably unearthing and destroying some of the remains. He believes up to 11 slaves may still be buried at the site.

In March, an archaeological study confirmed much of Mr. Panaritis’s research. Dr. Jessica Striebel MacLean, an archaeologist who conducted the study using two rounds of ground-penetrating radar, found what appears to be burial shafts and the profiles of four collapsed coffins just beyond the white cemetery, near what would have been Hunts Point Road — now simply a path. The white landowner graves are situated east-west, in keeping with Christian burial practices. The slaves would have been buried away from the masters in unconsecrated ground. Their grave orientation — north-south — suggests lower socioeconomic status.

This summer parks officials met with the community and discussed possibilities for identifying the site: a digital kiosk, new seating and signs, an engraved stone marker or a plaque. Some have suggested building a visitors’ center at the site, but officials are wary of disturbing the remains with construction. The department is now working on renderings and estimated costs for various scenarios.

The archaeological study was financed with \$15,000 set aside by State Senator Jeffrey D. Klein, with an additional \$35,000 to support P.S. 48’s programs related to the project. Councilman Rafael Salamanca Jr. has also budgeted \$100,000 for improvements at the site.

Dr. MacLean suggests that further surveys be conducted, as well as research into who might be buried there, using documents and wills, which include the transfer of ownership of the slaves from one generation to the next.

In the spring of 2016, Justin Czarka, a teacher, and his students helped Dr. MacLean with her survey. They measured the standing gravestones of the Hunt, Willett and Leggett families who settled here in the 17th century, identified the types of stones used — marble, sandstone and granite — made drawings and wrote up their own reports.

“What was great about Jessica was that she was able to bring the kids into the process and work with them,” said Mr. Czarka, who teaches English as a second language at the school.

“The children were so actively engaged,” Dr. MacLean said. “And Justin used what we found as a jumping-off point for these kids to have them discuss the burial and memory traditions in their own families.” Children at the school come from a number of backgrounds and speak English, French, Chinese, Arabic and Spanish.

Mr. Czarka, who helped Mr. Panaritis found the **Hunts Point Slave Burial Ground** project and website, said some children suggested building an amphitheater or a stage at the site so that programs can be carried out in the park. His students have been creating a “needs assessment,” suggesting benches, trash cans, water fountains and new plantings — basics at most city parks that are lacking at Drake.

Because the park has so few visitors, those basics have been ignored for years. Benches, some argue, will only attract a bad element. Mr. Czarka disagrees. “It reinforces this vicious cycle,” he said. “If you don’t have those things, people won’t come to the park. But if they’re put in place, people will use it — for good,” he said, glancing over at Mr. Butler, still playing his trombone.

The Particulars

Project Hunts Point Slave Burial Ground memorial

Site Joseph Rodman Drake Park in the Bronx

In the works Since 2014

Driving forces Philip Panaritis, Justin Czarka, Jessica MacLean and the Parks Department

Cost Not yet known, though \$100,000 has been earmarked

Biggest obstacle Getting Parks Department and locals to agree