

2011-J629

LEGISLATIVE RESOLUTION commemorating Harlem's Historic African Burial Ground in Recognition of Black History Month, February of 2011

WHEREAS, All our greatest accomplishments rest on achievements our ancestors made before us and we can only evolve, grow and prosper by remembering our history; and

WHEREAS, It is the sense of this Legislative Body to celebrate, preserve and promote special places and worthy endeavors which teach young and old, about all the varied peoples whose labors and talents have enriched, enlightened and ennobled New York City and State and our great nation, the United States of America; and

WHEREAS, With February being Black History Month, it is a time to reflect on the struggles and victories of African-Americans throughout our country's history and to recognize their numerous valuable contributions to society; and

WHEREAS Last year, downtown, in February, with pomp and fanfare a new visitor's center opened near the 'Negro's Cemetery' rediscovered in 1991, that was active during the 17th and 18th centuries as the final resting place of tens of thousands of African slaves whose unpaid labor helped make New York the nation's great commercial capital; and

WHEREAS, Uptown, largely unknown, yet another 'Negro's Cemetery' existed in East Harlem below what is now the MTA's 126th Street Bus Depot, this colonial-era burial ground for African slaves and free blacks occupies a quarter acre lot on the original Dutch Reformed Church grounds, on First Avenue between 126th and 127th Streets and was in operation until as late as 1845; and

WHEREAS, In New York State, slavery, gradually abolished in 1827, persisted until 1830, and laws enacted prior to that date, though encouraging the conversion of Negroes, and Indians to the Christian faith strictly stipulated, "that the baptism of any slave should not be deemed a manumission of such slave" and even in death, blacks were denied human dignity conferred by ceremony, with a law passed in 1722 inspired by fear of conspiracies, decreeing that "all negro and Indian slaves dying within the City should be buried by daylight... that not more than 12

slaves should attend any funeral under penalty of a public whipping... that no pall, gloves, or favors of any sort were to be worn, and any slave who was found to have held a pall or worn gloves or favors was to be whipped. The non Christian character of the blacks prevented burial in consecrated ground"; and

WHEREAS, Ironically, General George Washington's slaves, his valet William Lee and cook Mrs. Thompson stayed with him during his weeks stationed in Harlem conducting America's Revolutionary War of Independence against the British; and

WHEREAS, Even late into the 19th century, once Harlem's Dutch Reformed Church sold its historic burial ground for commercial development, the remains of whites were disinterred and reburied with a solemn church service at Woodlawn Cemetery, while those of blacks were left in place and desecrated; and

WHEREAS, The contributions, striving for freedom and suffering of Native and African-Americans has been imperative, but trivialized, extraordinary and exemplary, but ignored; and

WHEREAS, It is a seminal occurrence in our history encapsulated in this sacred place; and

WHEREAS, Harlem's oldest congregation, the Elmendorf Reformed Church made up of descendants of enslaved people, under the heroic leadership of The Reverend Dr. Patricia A. Singletary, valiantly led the fight to

gain Harlem's African Burial Ground's preservation, recognition and fitting commemoration; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, That this Legislative Body pause in its deliberations to recognize the proud history of Harlem's historic African Burial Ground; and be it further

RESOLVED, That a copy of this Resolution, suitably engrossed, be transmitted to The Reverend Patricia Singletary, Pastor, Elmendorf Reformed Church.