



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Jeffrey D. Klein

## Senator Klein, Assemblyman Crespo and Bronx Community Leaders Call for Official Recognition of African Slave Burial Ground at Drake Park

JEFFREY D. KLEIN January 24, 2014

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**BRONX, NY**— Standing in front of the south side of Joseph Rodman Drake Park in Hunts Point, Senator Jeff Klein (D-Bronx/Westchester), local elected officials and Bronx community leaders called for official recognition of an African Slave Burial Ground discovered last year. Evidence of the Burial Ground site was discovered last year by a group of students at P.S. 48, led by Teacher-Historian, Philip Panaritis at the south side of Drake Park.

At the event, Klein and local leaders urged the State Office of Historic Preservation to officially designate the site a historic place, if the evidence is verified. Additionally, Klein and local elected officials called for

the burial ground to be considered for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places. Klein and community leaders stressed the importance of speedy designation to prevent the site from further neglect, damage or desecration.

**Senator Klein (D-Bronx/Westchester) said:** “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. 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. With the recent discoveries made by students at P.S. 48 at Drake Park, it is critical that we take action to prevent this site from further damage or desecration.

“That’s why I am calling on the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation to grant this historic site the recognition it deserves as soon as possible. Working with the local elected officials and community leaders, we will fight to honor the history that has been forgotten for all too long here at Drake Park.”

In December, Senator Klein wrote a letter to the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, calling on the Department to look further into the potential historic significance of the site and grant the Burial Ground official recognition. Recognizing the potential significance of the evidence discovered at Drake Park, the NYS Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation has agreed to review the existing evidence, which was subsequently forwarded earlier this month.

**Assemblyman Marcos Crespo, Chair of the Assembly Task Force on New Americans, (D-Bronx) said:** "I stand with Senator Klein and support his call for diligent city and state action to officially acknowledge the fact that Native Americans and slaves were buried in what today is Joseph Rodman Drake Park. There is a need for this special place to be designated as a historic site on both the federal and state levels. The burial ground should stand as reminder, to Bronx residents, of the history of social and economic injustices that have shaped our society. This burial ground signifies an integral part of our state and national history and a proper designation to memorialize the site should not be delayed due to bureaucratic red tape or indifference."

In 2013, faculty and students of P.S. 48 in the Bronx uncovered evidence of an African Slave Burial Ground Site. By reviewing maps, census records, photos, and other documentary evidence, the faculty and students at P.S. 48 have also identified this park as a burial site for over one hundred African slaves previously unacknowledged by history.

The ability for PS 48 to do this research so thoroughly comes from a program, known as *Telling America's Story (TAS)*. TAS is an intensive, federally-funded professional development project for American History Teachers in elementary, middle, and high schools in the Bronx Community School Districts 8, 11, & 12. The program combines content-rich traditional American History and teaching skills development for Teacher-Historians. Phil Panaritis is Bronx TAH Grants Project Director and has lived in the Bronx for 20 years.

For an overview of evidence discovered and to learn more about the Hunts Point Burial Ground Project, please go to: <http://hpsbg.weebly.com/>.

**National Action Network Bronx Chapter President, Dashawn Williams said:** "The National Action Network Bronx Chapter is committed to honoring the memory of our ancestors with a perpetual memorial that stands as a tribute to their enormous sacrifice and to the building of American culture and, to people of the diaspora everywhere.

"We must begin the conversation towards identifying and properly acknowledging our ancestors. The coalition will concentrate on developing a structured plan of action to get the work done and with the support of our Congressman Jose Serrano - having a long track record of improving the lives and living conditions for many Bronxites, Sen. Jeffrey Klein - fighting to protect the interest of his constituents, and to all the respective elected officials - we can get it done together.

"I want to again thank Mr. Phil Panaritis (DOE) and all the young talented students and committed educators at PS 48 for the research and study projects that has brought us all to the stages of memorializing our ancestors to the highest level possible."

**NAACP Parkchester Branch President Beverly Roberts said:** "We must preserve with dignity and respect the burial grounds of our ancestors. We must never forget the wretched and inhumane conditions that slaves endured throughout their lives on a daily basis. We must not allow our enslaved ancestors to vanish from American consciousness. There are too many unmarked slave burial sites often only discovered by chance. Let us unite and commit to the core principal that enslaved African - Americans must be laid to rest with the dignity they deserve.

"As the sons and daughters of the slaves, let us give life to our dead ancestors by speaking in a loud voice that says, 'I have searched for you and I have found you. Now your soul shall be free'."

**Brian Carlin, Researcher and Co-Founder of the Hunts Point Slave Burial Ground (HPSBG) Educational Project said:** "We are grateful to Senator Klein for his advocacy on behalf of this site with the NY State Department of Parks. For the past two years we have been researching the question of exactly where the HPSBG was located. In the process, we've collected a preponderance of evidence -- dozens of archival maps, newspaper accounts, census reports and photographs about Drake Park, the slave burying ground, and the history of larger Hunts Point community.

"In September 2013, a team of scientists from the USDA conducted a GPR Analysis of the site all of the above evidence pointed to. Their report identified "anthropogenic features" about six feet underneath the parkland north of Drake Park South -- exactly where all the documentary evidence predicted the HPSBG was located.

"Now, based on an integration of this extensive archival evidence and this GPR Report, we believe the exact location of the HPSBG has been found and welcome a speedy review of our findings by the State Parks Department."