

Discovering Your History

Your Personal Keepsake Journal

Presented by the
NYC Economic Development Corporation (NYC/EDC) &
Harlem African Burial Ground Initiative



NYC / EDC

A Warm Welcome

Dear Families,

Welcome to Discovering Your History Your Personal Keepsake. This journal is a collaboration between the NYC Economic Development Corporation (NYC/EDC) and the Harlem African Burial Ground Initiative, created to inspire families to connect with their histories, celebrate their cultural heritage, and engage across generations.

The Harlem African Burial Ground, located beneath the decommissioned MTA bus depot at 126th Street and 2nd Avenue, represents a powerful link to Harlem's past. It is a sacred space where the stories of African and Indigenous ancestors who shaped this vibrant community are preserved. The research and discovery that brought this Burial Ground to light began through dedicated efforts to document and understand the narratives of the past. This journal continues that tradition.

We hope you use this journal as a tool to reflect on your history, record meaningful memories, and spark conversations with loved ones. By exploring your roots and sharing your stories, you help preserve the legacies of those who came before, while passing their wisdom on to future generations.

Thank you for joining us in this journey of discovery and remembrance. Your stories are an essential part of Harlem's enduring legacy.

Warmly,



The Harlem African Burial Ground Initiative and the NYC Economic Development Corporation

An Ancestral Journey

This journal encourages you to explore how your lives are connected to the history of the Harlem African Burial Ground and the people who were buried there. You might discover direct connections if you are from New York, especially Harlem. However, you can also use the Harlem African Burial Ground as a lens for viewing your own lives and communities in different ways. For instance, one question you will find in this journal is, “who are your ancestors?” We usually think of ancestors as people from the past who are part of our family. This journal will help you think about ancestors we are connected to through history, shared experiences and cultural connections. We are eager for you to learn about all the ways that the Harlem African Burial Ground and the ancestors buried there are important to our personal histories, the history of New York, the history of the United States and the African Diaspora. We thank you for taking this journey with us.

Dr. Rachel Watkins

Commemoration Through

Design This journal represents the process of commemorating, acknowledging, educating, and healing the impact of slavery and the effect it has had on communities of people. Many of our historic public spaces have become places where people confront the past, challenge injustice, and rethink the stories we have been told. Anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot, in his book *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, describes how important events are often left out of history — what he calls “Silences.” One of the biggest “Silences” in the United States is the lack of recognition of slavery, its role in shaping the country, the suffering it caused, and the lasting effects we still see today. As a designer and architect, my goal is to create spaces that bring hidden histories to light. Like history, architecture can either hide or reveal the truth. This journal reflects that same purpose — it is a way to give voice to forgotten stories, encourage learning, and inspire change. Through remembering and honoring the past, we can create a better future.

Rodney Leon

Introduction

This keepsake journal is an opportunity for you to explore facts, information and stories about your family. Knowledge about one's family is important to consider because it helps to explain who we are, and it suggests who we have the potential to become.

Formerly, this exercise was known as genealogy. Genealogy offers information about who preceded you, your ancestors, when and where they lived and died, who they married and who their parents were. Family history allows an individual to recall what these persons did during their lives (between birth and death).

Family, however, can be defined in more than one way. It can be explained as the biological family to which we were born and/or the family that is created beyond biology – those who take care of and support us through our lives. Either circumstance allows us to think about and reflect upon the people and experiences that have helped to shape who we are today. The process of recording the names and dates of these individuals can be facilitated through the creation of family trees and the collecting of stories, commonly known as oral history.

When assembling this information, please remember to be thoughtful and sensitive in recording the information shared with you. If information shared is of a sensitive or painful nature, please respect the concern of the individual who shared it with you noting that you will not disclose it, but only retain privately the material disclosed for the sole purpose of determining family connections.



To help you engage in this process, we are providing some questions that will hopefully inspire thoughtful conversations.

Suggested Conversation Starters:

1. How do you define family? Who do you consider your family?
2. Who are your parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles?
3. When did they live?
4. Where did they live? Did they reside in more than one location?
5. What kind of work did they do? What skills did they have?
6. How did they interact with others socially?
7. What kind of stories and information have been shared with you that shed some insight into their lives and experiences?

This exercise can at first seem overwhelming, but it is worth the time and energy it will take. Be patient with yourself and others. Knowing the stories, secrets, experiences and patterns of behavior that have evolved through direct contact with one's family has the potential to increase understanding. This process has the potential to increase understanding. This process can also help to promote healing by investigating sources of pain, conflict and rejection. Knowledge is power. **Good luck!**

Remember that uncovering our individual and collective histories will add to the body of knowledge important to noting and incorporating aspects of African American history not previously known or acknowledged. In so doing, the collective sharing of vital information will promote and enhance education about American history.

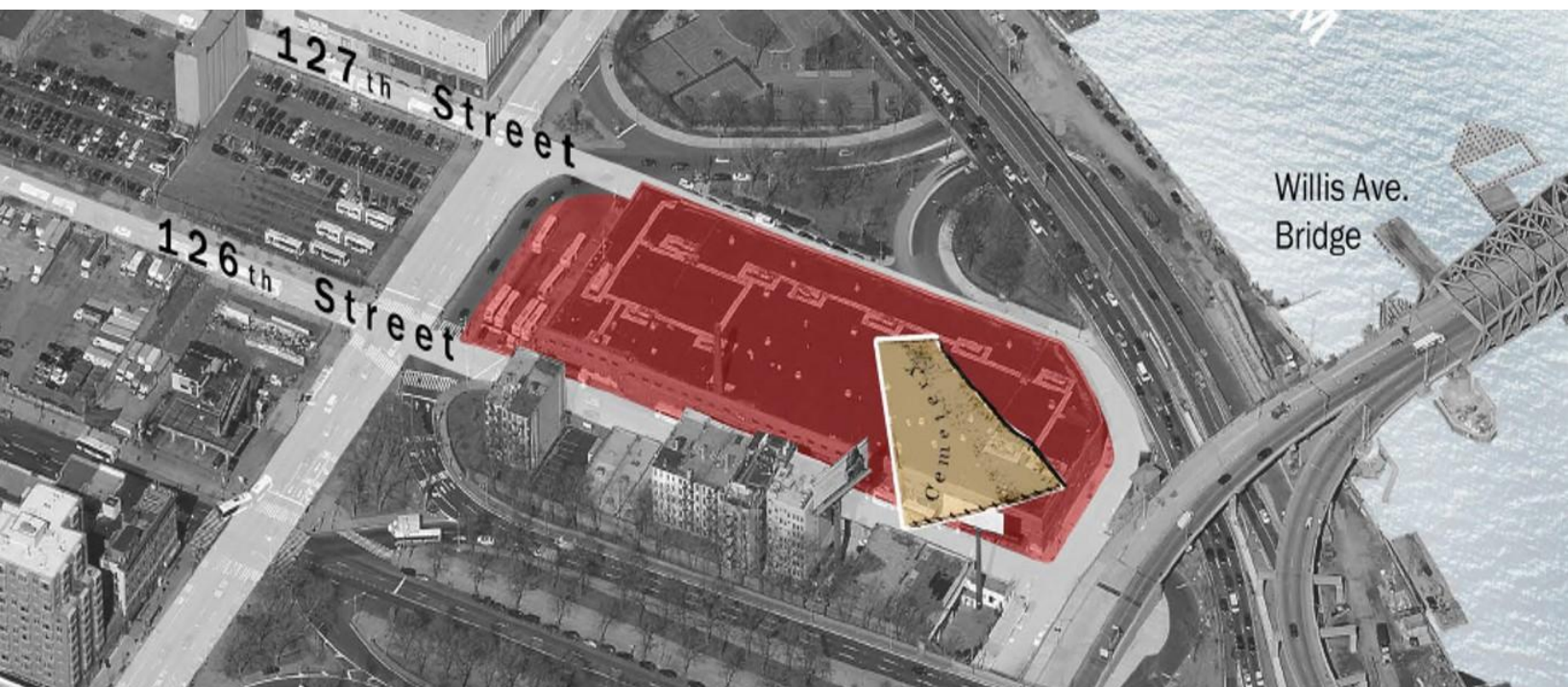


The Harlem African Burial Ground

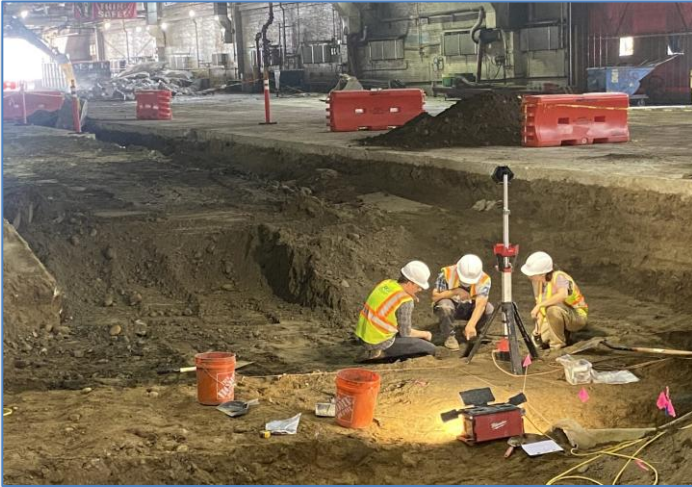
The Harlem African Burial Ground, located at 126th Street and 2nd Avenue beneath the bus depot, is a vital historical site where African and Indigenous descendants were laid to rest in the 17th through 19th centuries. Brought to public attention through meticulous research and advocacy by the Harlem African Burial Ground Initiative (HABGI), it stands as a testament to Harlem's foundational role in New York City's history.

In 2014, archaeologists commissioned by NYCEDC uncovered disarticulated human remains of people, of African and Indigenous descent at the bus depot site, conclusively establishing the burial ground's location within it.

The archeological work continues as the early step toward realizing the HABGI and NYCEDC's vision for preserving and redeveloping the bus depot site. HABGI and NYCEDC intends to honor and memorialize the Harlem African Burial Ground through a new outdoor memorial and indoor cultural education while addressing affordable housing and job creating needs in East Harlem. This effort ensures that the Burial Ground's legacy remains a source of reflection, connection, and inspiration for generations to come.



The Harlem African Burial Ground Preserves and Protects Our Community's History



The excavation site of the Harlem African Burial Ground at 126th Street and Second Avenue in the decommissioned MTA Bus Depot.



Archeological finds, identified at the Harlem African Burial Ground during the 2024 Excavation. A mix between practical items and very early Indigenous tools were uncovered.

The NYC Economic Development Corporation and the Harlem African Burial Ground Initiative have hosted many community events to share news about the project so that our community remains informed and engaged as the project moves forward.



*Harlem African Burial Ground Commemorative Ceremony
June 2024*

NYS Senator Cordell Cleare, NYS Assemblymember Al Taylor, NYC Manhattan Community Board 11 Chair Xavier Santiago, Harlem African Burial Ground Initiative Members; Sharon Wilkins, Manhattan Deputy Borough Historian Emerita, Melissa Mark Viverito, Former Speaker New York City Council and Reverend Dr. Patricia Singletary, and EDC were joined by other Harlem leaders to honor United States Congressman Charles B. Rangel.

Our Story – Storytelling Reflection

What is an uplifting story that you've heard about an ancestor or elder in your family?

What traditions does your family have that you would like to pass on to future generations?

Describe a place that is special to your family and why it matters.

Did our family have special skills? Did they pass them down?

Who are the storytellers in your family?

Why is it important to remember and honor our ancestors?

What words come to mind when you think about Harlem's history?

What does Harlem mean to your family?

Family Tree Activity

This Keepsake Journal is designed to help you learn about the importance of the Harlem African Burial Ground to preserving and protecting our history.

We hope that you will use what you are learning about the Harlem African Burial Ground, identify with the work that we are doing, and take what we are doing personally in terms of exploring and preserving your own family history and your family's stories.

There are many ways of creating a family tree and sharing the story of your family. The following pages offer a way to begin these important conversations.



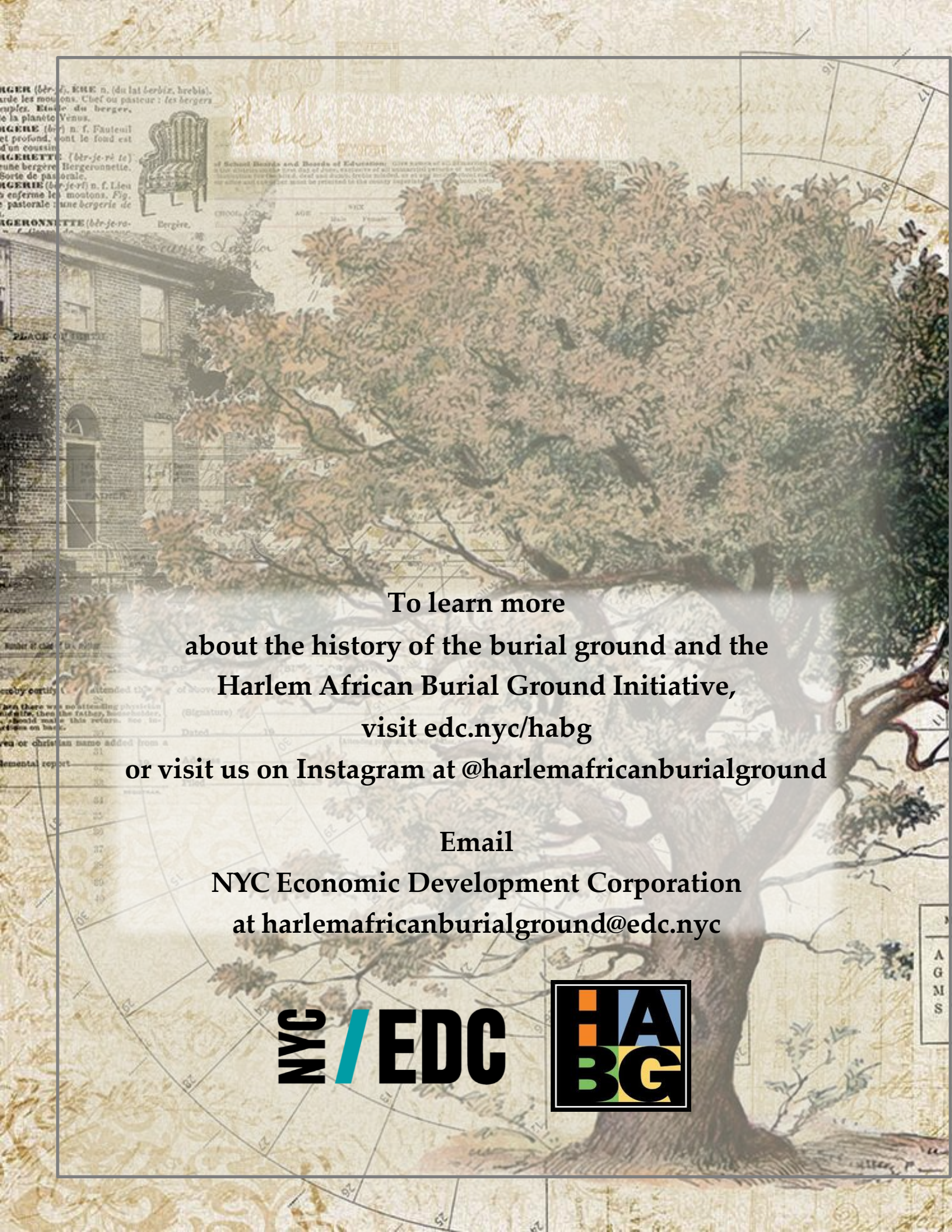
Your Narrative

These pages are included for you as you document your own family story.

1. How do you define family? Who do you consider your family?
2. Who are your parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles?
3. What time period did they live in? (ex. 1890s, 1920s, 1940s, etc.)
4. Where did they live? Did they reside in more than one location?
5. What kind of work did they do? What skills did they have?
6. How did they interact with others socially?
7. What kind of stories and information have been shared with you that shed some insight into their lives and experiences?

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**To learn more
about the history of the burial ground and the
Harlem African Burial Ground Initiative,
visit edc.nyc/habg
or visit us on Instagram at [@harlemafricanburialground](https://www.instagram.com/harlemafricanburialground)**

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