

# WEST FARMS MEMORIAL GARDENS

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## At Beck Memorial Presbyterian Church

Proposal for a Garden and Community Center on the site of the WF Enslaved Persons Burial Ground

Proposal and Presentation by Laura James, Bronx CB6 Youth and Education Chair,  
Land Use Committee member, with Nilka Martell, Loving the Bronx, Tuesday, September 9, 2025

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## LOCATION:

Beck Memorial Presbyterian Church  
980 E 180 St, Bronx, New York,  
10460

Between Boston Rd. and Vyse Ave.

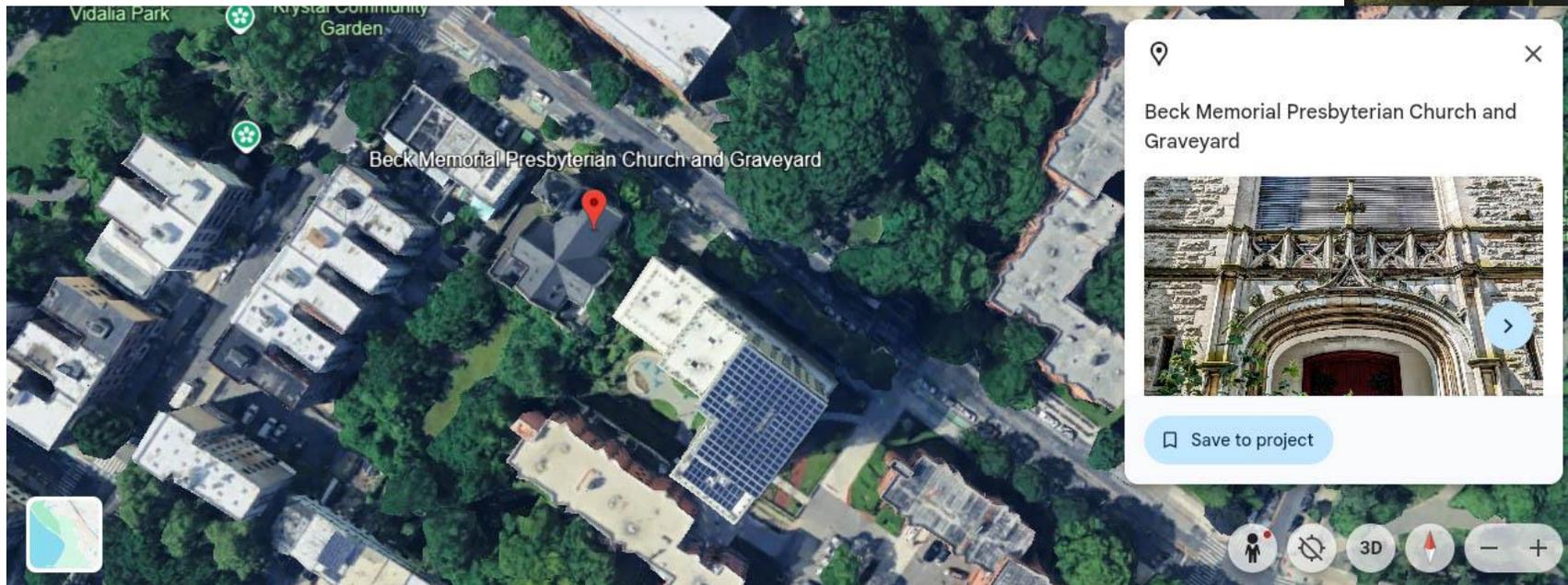
Bronx Community Board 6

### Lot Information

Address: 980 East 180th St  
Lot Area Size: 28,945 sq ft  
Lot Frontage: 115.03 ft  
Lot Depth: 275.19 ft

### Church Information

Year built: 1905  
Church floor area: Over 3,100 sq ft  
\*Landmark: 1967 (?)



**WEST FARMS  
MEMORIAL GARDENS**

Beck Memorial Presbyterian Church  
And Graveyard, Google Earth

# General information about the neighborhood

## Bronx Community District 6 and West Farms (14)

Community District 6 covers 1.5 square miles in the central Bronx, serving the communities of Belmont, Bathgate, Tremont, and West Farms. According to the 2018 American Community Survey, the population was 175,456. Bronx CB 6 is primarily populated by low-income residents; with an unemployment rate of 23.9% and has the second-highest percentage residents under the age of 18 at 28.4%. 60% of residents receive some form of income assistance and 30-34% of residents live

under the NYC poverty line. CB 6 district had the 2nd highest private residential eviction filing rate, the 3rd highest housing code violation rate, and 7<sup>th</sup> highest crime rate in NYC. Also has the 2nd highest number of homeless shelters.

As of 2024, the median income was about \$24,800 per year. The majority of West Farms properties are small apartments (studio to two bedrooms) or high-rise (three or four bedrooms) or small apartment buildings. A majority of the West Farms neighborhood's residential property is renter-occupied which makes it a promising investment opportunity with upside financial and social impact potential [1]. West Farms in the Central Bronx is designated as a Qualified Opportunity Zone [2]. There is a high rate of poverty in this historically redlined district.

According to Census data, the West Farms neighborhood has a lower average per capita income than 98.8% of U.S. neighborhoods. This area also has an unusually high percentage of children living in poverty at 73.5%; this is a high percentage when compared to other neighborhoods in the country. With nearly one in four children growing up in poverty, this neighborhood stands out for the depth of the problem [3].

A large percentage of residents receive Housing Choice Voucher Section 8 subsidies (17.8%) and SNAP benefits (23.9%)[4]. Community Board 6 is currently planning major development with nearly 3,000 new homes and at least 72,000 square feet of retail and commercial space incoming in the next five to ten years. Upzoning and Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs) are two innovative approaches that would benefit both renters and homeowners, according to the Community Board 6 report. Additionally, the growing population calls for more schools and daycare facilities to ease overcrowding. A number of small businesses and vacant spaces can be found along the East Tremont commercial corridor in the Central Bronx.

Birds-eye view image identifying some relevant locations nearby



West Farms Enslaved Persons Burial Ground

## Proposal: West Farms Memorial Gardens

### Background

The grounds behind Beck Memorial Presbyterian Church in West Farms hold significant historical value. Research and local knowledge confirm that this area includes an African burial ground as well as additional cemeteries concentrated along East 180th Street between Boston Road and Vyse Avenue. These sites reflect a broad span of American history, including the burial of enslaved Africans, Native Americans, early European settlers, and veterans who served in four wars, including the War of 1812.

This land has remained a burial ground throughout its history. Current maps and records, including Google listings, continue to identify it as such. The presence of likely old-growth trees further indicates that the ground has been undisturbed for centuries, making preservation both a cultural and environmental imperative.

### Significance

West Farms, established before 1663, has deep roots in the history of New York and the United States. The burial grounds behind Beck Memorial reflect that history in a concentrated and tangible way. Preserving this site acknowledges the lives and contributions of all who are interred here, particularly enslaved Africans whose presence is too often erased.

This proposal does not view the community's enslaved past as a source of shame, but as a vital part of the nation's story that deserves recognition. Alongside it, we honor those who fought for this country, families who built their lives here, and generations who shaped West Farms into the community it is today.



Top- Yard view -  
Looking west at  
Beck Memorial from  
Bryant Ave, Bottom-  
Looking east from  
Vyse Ave

WEST FARMS  
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## Proposal

We propose transforming the area behind Beck Memorial Presbyterian Church into **West Farms Memorial Gardens**, a dedicated public memorial and educational space.

Key elements include:

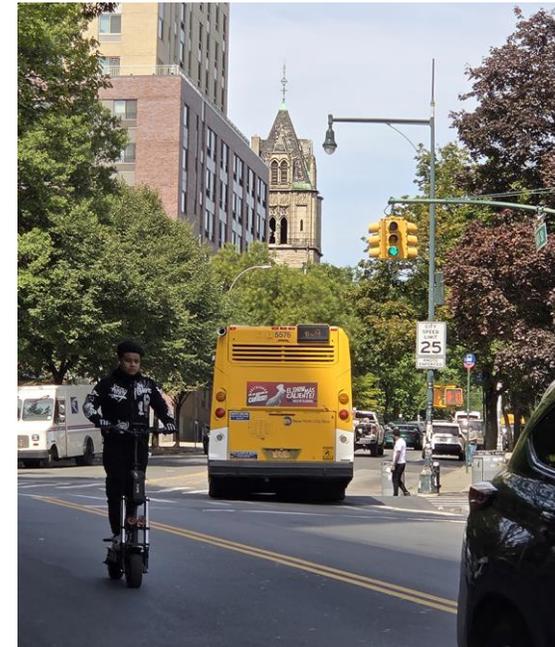
- Historic Commemoration:** Markers and interpretive materials honoring enslaved Africans, Native Americans, early settlers, soldiers, and other community members buried on the site.
- Educational Programming:** Partnerships with schools and community organizations to provide learning opportunities in history, civic engagement, and cultural awareness.
- Community Engagement:** Intergenerational activities such as gardening, art, and cultural programs that foster pride and reflection.
- Green Space Preservation:** Maintaining the existing trees and landscape to protect the integrity of the burial ground and support climate resilience.
- Accessibility:** Public entry designed to respect both the memorial space and the church, with seating for quiet reflection.

## Recommendations

1. That the Presbytery of New York and the New York City Parks Department collaborate to designate and maintain the site as a public memorial.
2. That the site be nominated for listing on the **National Register of Historic Places** and the **New York State Register of Historic Places**, as it clearly meets the criteria for historic significance.
3. That, if the City and Parks Department are unable or unwilling to manage the project, a coalition of qualified local organizations and community leaders be recognized and empowered to oversee its stewardship.

## Conclusion

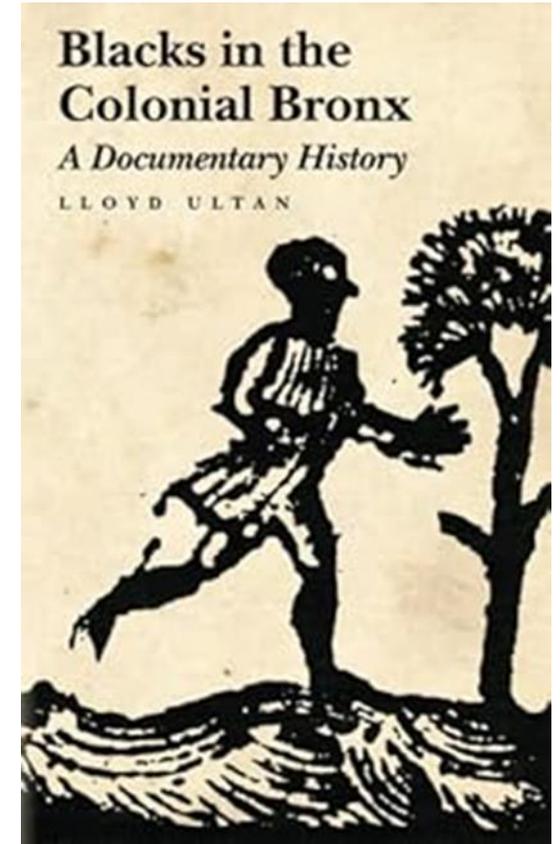
The establishment of West Farms Memorial Gardens represents a unique opportunity to preserve history, honor those buried here, and provide the community with a meaningful space for reflection, learning, and pride. This project will ensure that the history of West Farms—its challenges and its contributions—remains visible and accessible for generations to come.



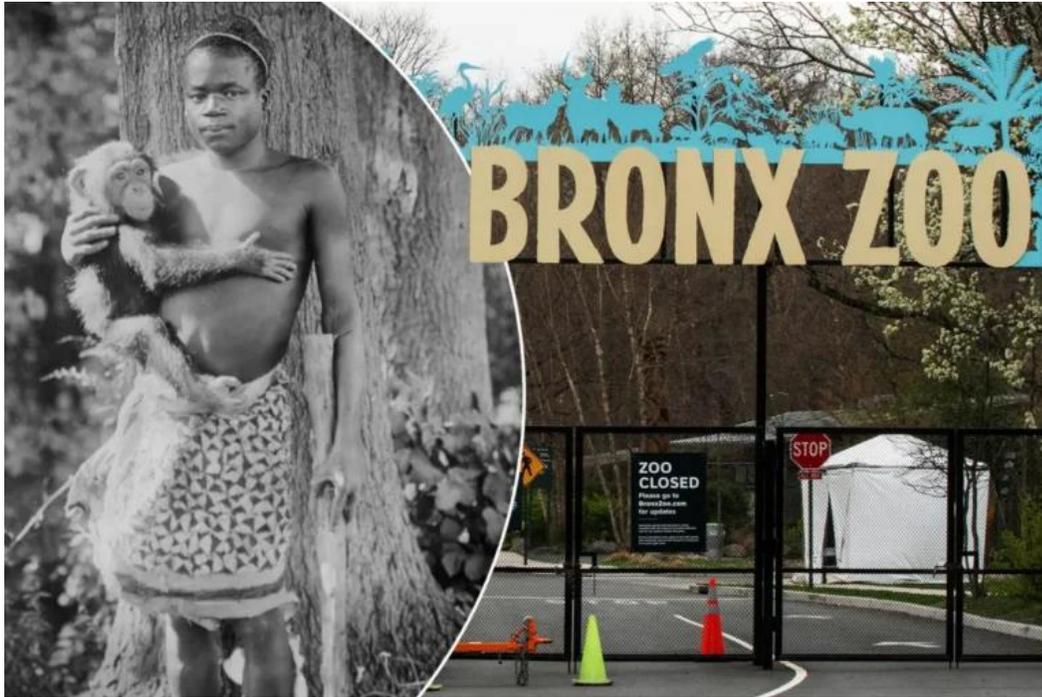
West Farms Enslaved Persons Burial Ground

## Some brief history from *Blacks in the Colonial Bronx: A Documentary History* – 2010 by Lloyd Ultan

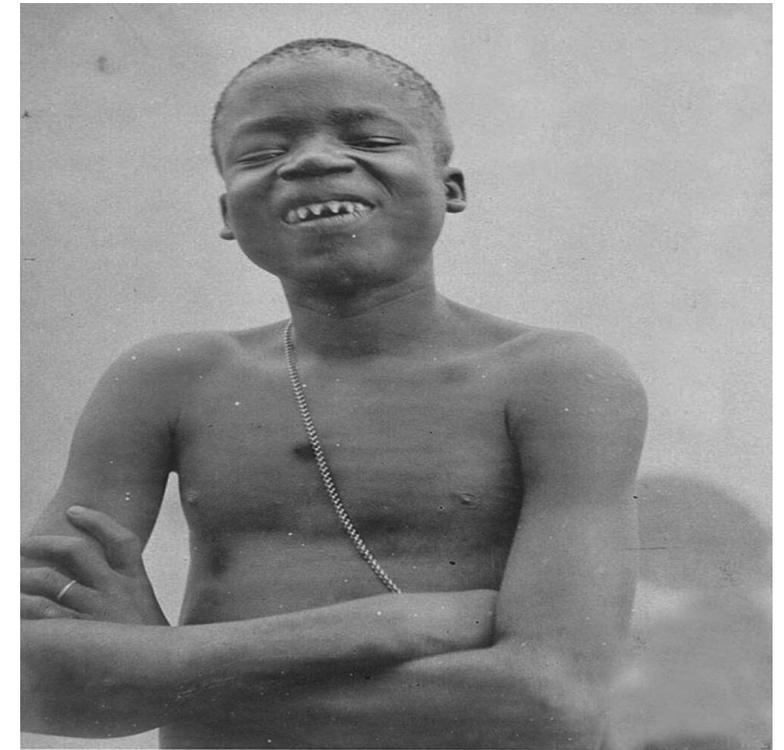
- “An examination of the surviving documents from the colonial period indicates strongly that Blacks constituted between ten and fifteen percent of the total population of what is today the Bronx. Thus, the presence of Black people in New York City's northernmost borough extends back over three centuries.”
- “We know for certain Richard Morris (Morrisania) and his wife brought a significant number of Black slaves to what is now The Bronx about 1670. He also had European indentured servants work his land side by side with his Black slaves.
- “Where did the slaves come from? In the early colonial years, Barbados was a chief supply.”
- “A severe flood in 1767 swept some Black slaves into a rampaging Bronx River, and only a concerted effort was able to save them all.”
- “At the insistence of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, which sent out Anglican missionaries to the colonies, blacks, both slave and free, were to be converted to the religion of the Church of England.”
- “The first free Black family recorded in the colonial Bronx lived somewhere near Fordham and its vicinity in 1698. They were listed as Antone the neger, his wife Diana, and their three children, Ben, Abraham and Jacob.”
- “Blacks, both slave and free, worked to clear the land, planted the seeds, tended the crops, reaped the harvests, looked after the livestock, built and repaired fences and walls, did the cooking, cleaning and washing around the house, and took care of the children and the elderly. ...Thus, along with other inhabitants of the area, Blacks helped to develop colonial Bronx.”



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Ota Benga displayed as a human exhibit at the Bronx Zoo. 1906



“Ota Benga, a Congolese man exhibited in the New York’s Bronx Zoo in 1906, was shockingly described as a ‘missing link’ of evolution. Over 40,000 people came to see him every day and was often subject to mocking from the crowd.”  
<https://rarehistoricalphotos.com/human-zoo-history-pictures-1900-1958/>

## Source No. 1- 1814. Deed where Presbyterian church acquires the land, Westchester County Historical Society.

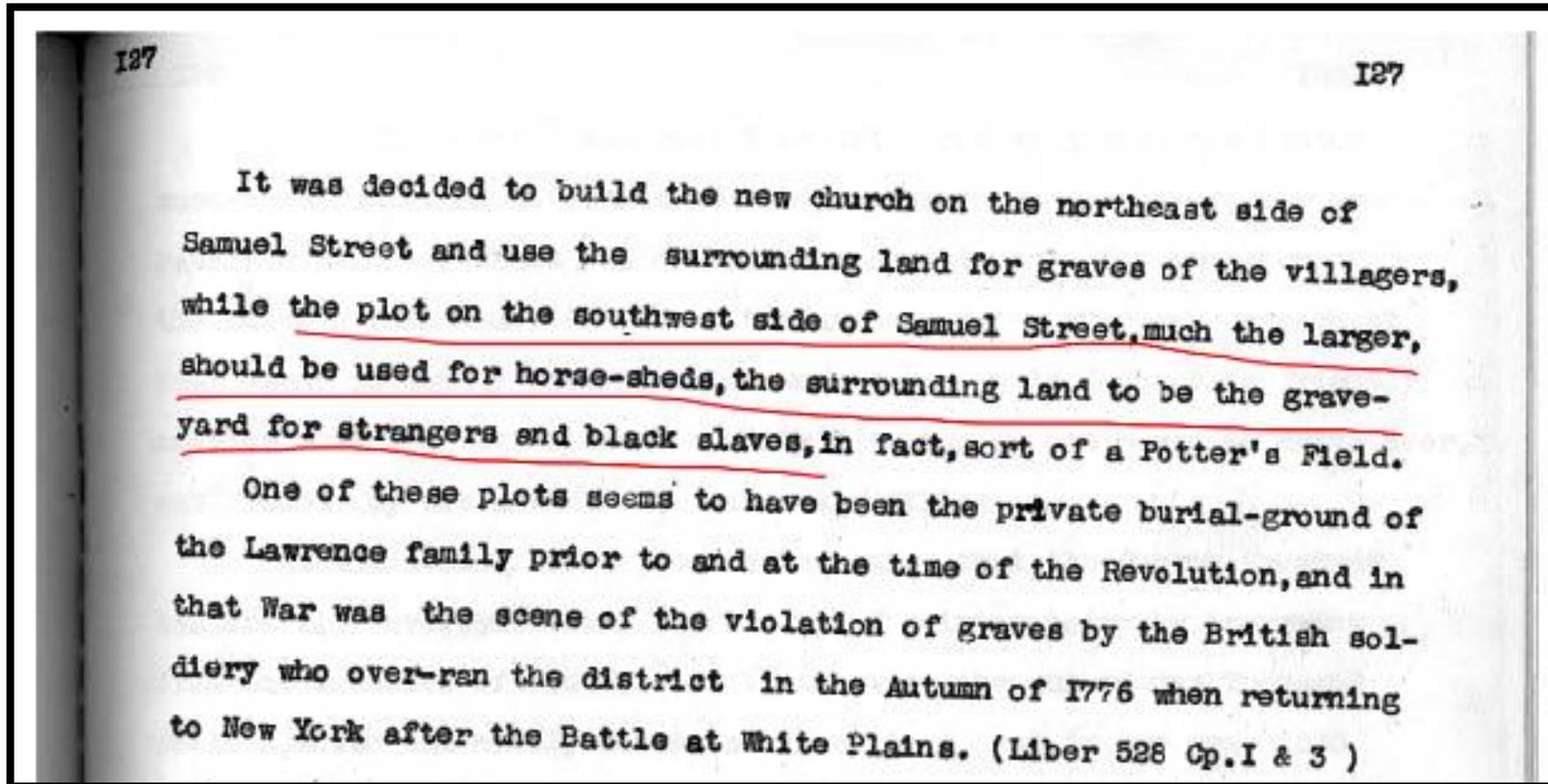
50 years before the end of slavery, on December 15, 1814, representatives from the Board of Trustees of The First Presbyterian Church of the Village of West Farms acquired the land where the present church and Veterans Cemetery are located. The deed records that they paid \$1.00.

In the deed, the land is described as “opposite Mr. Lydig’s Mills in the county of Westchester”. The deed also indicates that the Lawrence family had a burial ground there, and states, “...Reserving nevertheless to Thomas Lawrence the former owner of the said lot his heirs, and assigns, the right & privilege of being interred on the said lots above described.

These lots “are known and distinguished on a certain map made by Wm Bridges one of the Surveyors of the City of New York, dated July 1809...”

SAMUEL, A. LAWRENCE & WIFE, & ORS., :  
TO :  
THE TRUSTEES OF THE 1ST PRESBYTERIAN :  
CHURCH IN WEST FARMS, : THIS INDENTURE made the fifteenth  
day of December in the year -- our Lord one thousand eight hundred and fourteen  
BETWEEN SAMUEL A. LAWRENCE of the City of New York, Esquire, and CATHARINE, his  
wife, and JASPER WARD, of the said City, Merchant, and ANN, his wife, of the first  
part and ROBERT GIVAN, CALRB PELL, ESENEZER WATERBURY, JAMES BATHGATE, JAMES  
RENWICK, AND JOHN B. GILLESPIE, Trustees of the First Presbyterian Church in the  
Village of West Farms, in the town of Westchester, - - - - WITNESSETH that  
the said parties of the first part for certain good, causes and in consideration  
of the sum of ONE DOLLAR to them in hand paid by the said parties of the second  
part, at the time of the execution hereof, the receipt whereof is hereby acknow-  
ledged have given granted, bargained, sold, aliened, released, enfeoffed, conveyed  
and confirmed and by these presents do give grant, bargain, sell, alien, release  
enfeoff convey and confirm unto the said parties of the second part, and to their  
successors and assigns forever, ALL those two certain lots, pieces or parcels  
of land, situate, lying and being near the Twelve Mile Stone opposite to Mr. Lydig's  
Mills in the County of Westchester in the State of New York, and are known and  
distinguished on a certain map made by William Bridges one of the Surveyors of the  
City of New York, dated July 1809 by

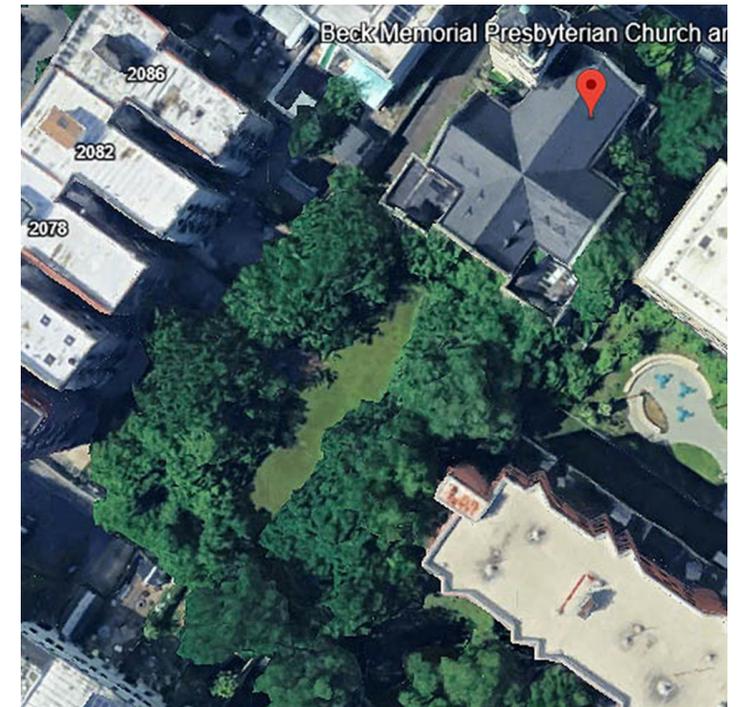
Source No 2. – Compiled before 1954. The Old Village of West Farms, by Stephen Wray (of American History Club- New Rochelle), Westchester County Historical Society



“Prior to and at the time of the Revolution”, the land where Beck Memorial now stands was the Lawrence Family Burial ground. After 1814, when the plot was acquired by the WFPC, the land used for horse sheds (area below current church), and a burial ground for “strangers and black slaves”.

Lot B on "The Cemeteries of The Bronx" map

Present Day –  
Beck Memorial Presbyterian Church  
And Graveyard, Google Earth



**Source No 2. – Compiled before 1954. The Old Village of West Farms, by Stephen Wray (of American History Club- New Rochelle), Westchester County Historical Society**

The original plot surrounding the Church ,including the bed of a proposed street north of the Church but never used, was little more than 100 feet in width by 175 feet in depth;but about 1850, John Butler ,who owned the land adjoining on the east, set aside a long,narrow strip of ground and sold it for private grave-plots;and at a later time, Alfred Pettit ,the local undertaker,laid out all the adjoining land eastward to Bryant Street,for single graves,calling it the WEST FARMS CEMETERY,..and this practice of selling graves was continued for many years by his successor,Isaac Butler .

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Present day - Phipps' Lambert Houses 1013 E. 180th St

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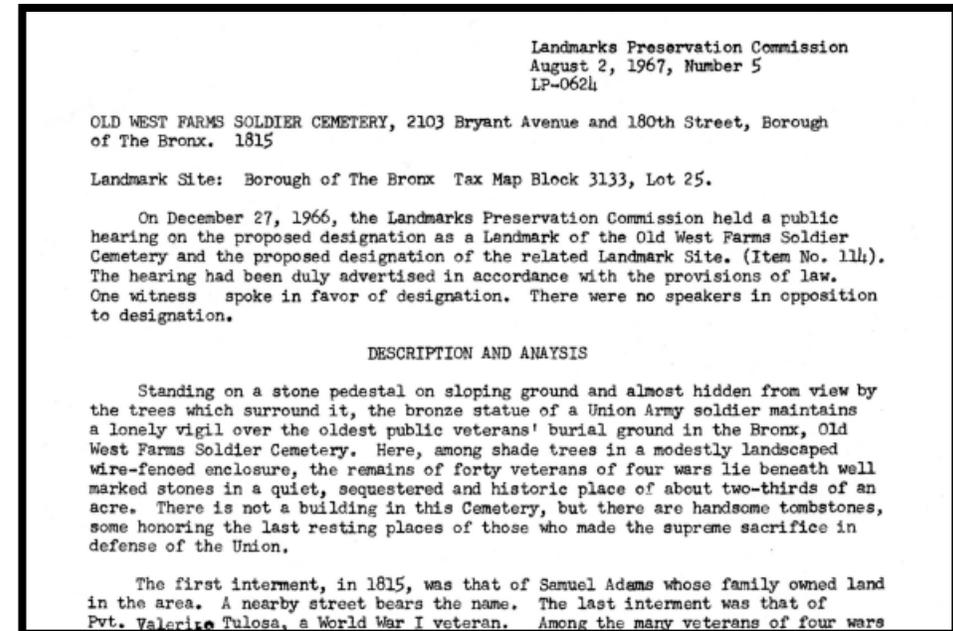
This article seems to indicate the local undertaker, Alfred Pettit, sold graves in the “West Farms Cemetery”, described as being “all the adjoining land eastward to Bryant Street”, and can be assumed to be where 1013 E. 180<sup>th</sup> St is located, although more research needs to be done (Lot E on updated map (8)). This building is slated to be demolished and rebuilt as part of Phipps’ Housing’s ongoing project at Lambert Houses.

Source No. 3 – 1967. Landmarks Preservation Commission, Old West Farms Soldier Cemetery, 2013 Bryant Ave and E180 St, Borough of The Bronx. 1815. Aug 2, 1967 <https://s-media.nyc.gov/agencies/lpc/lp/0624.pdf>

- In this document we learn that this area was so named in 1663! “They named the area West Farms to distinguish it from Westchester Village.”

- “Old West Farms Soldier Cemetery” is described as “the oldest public veteran’s burial ground in the Bronx.”

- “Among the many veterans of four wars buried there are two from the War of 1812, thirty-five from the Civil War, two from the Spanish-American War and two from World War I.”



NYC Parks Sign reads: West Farms Soldiers Cemetery  
Interred here are those who served in the United States  
in wars between 1812 and 1917. This is a place for  
reflection and remembrance.



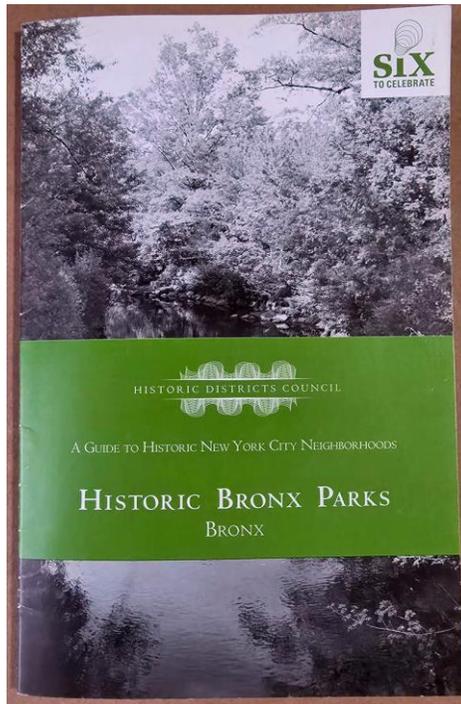
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West Farms Enslaved Persons Burial Ground

**Source No. 4 – 2014. Historic Bronx Parks: A Guide to Historic NY Neighborhoods. Historic District Councils.**

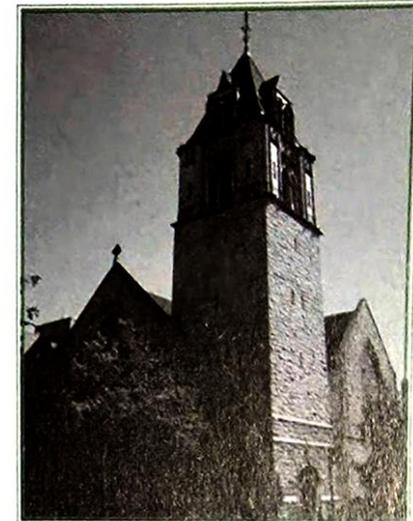
- In 1815, around 300 members of West Farms Village formed the church's congregation.
- The church was funded by Charles Bathgate Beck.
- The article alludes to the church mentioned in Lot A on "The Cemeteries of The Bronx" diagram.

**WEST FARMS  
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**5. BECK MEMORIAL  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
980 East 180th Street  
1905**

The congregation of this church dates back to 1815, when some of the roughly 300 inhabitants of West Farms Village formed the First Presbyterian Church. This is the church's second building, funded by trustee Charles Bathgate Beck in memory of his mother. The Gothic Revival stone building features rectangular arrowslit openings that evoke a medieval castle. Its large, imposing terra-cotta-clad tower features a mansard roof with dormer windows and an ornate weathervane.



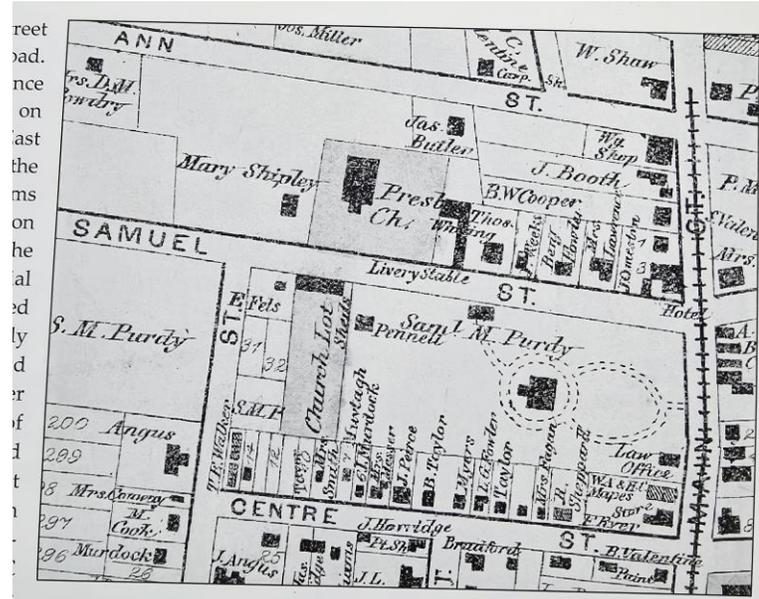
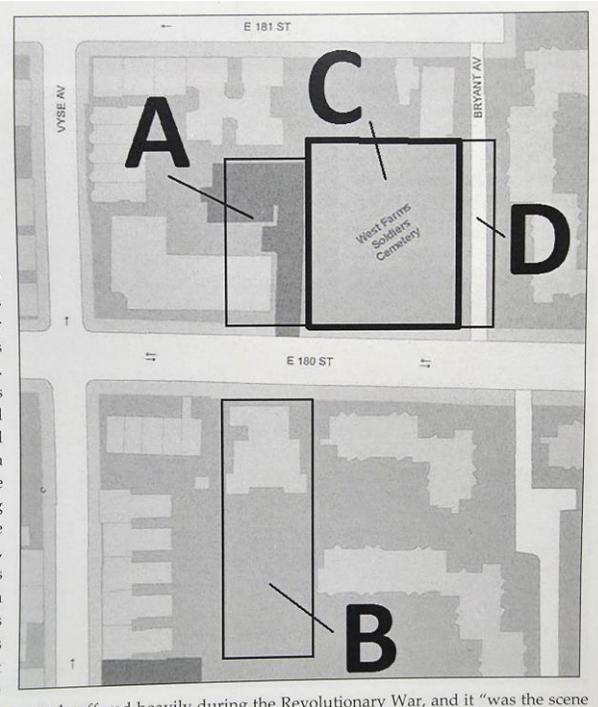
## Source No. 5 – 2016. The Cemeteries of The Bronx by Patrick Raftery, Westchester County Historical Society

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As recorded in “Cemeteries of the Bronx” the West Farms Presbyterian Church acquired land on both sides of Samuels St (present day E. 180<sup>th</sup> St). On this land, marked A on map, they built a church and a cemetery. (Present day - Rev. David Casella apts).

**The south lot, marked B in diagram, presently the WFPC, was at that time (and since the revolution\*) the Lawrence Family Burial ground.**

Back on the north side, in 1827, John Butler opened a private cemetery. Marked C and D on the diagram. (Present day- Veteran’s Cemetery and Lambert Houses Bryant Ave walkway).



West Farms Enslaved Persons Burial Ground

**Location:** North side of East 180<sup>th</sup> Street between Vyse Avenue and Boston Road. The cemetery originated as the Lawrence Family Burial Ground, which was located on the south side of Samuel Street (now East 180<sup>th</sup> Street) on the parcel marked “B” in the map at bottom right. In 1815 the West Farms Presbyterian Church acquired parcels on both sides on Samuel Street. The congregation established a church and burial ground on the north parcel (A), and it used the south lot where the Lawrence Family Burial Ground was located as a slave and pauper’s graveyard (B). In 1827 John Butler opened a private cemetery on the east side of the church (C and D). The slave and pauper’s graveyard was forgotten until it was uncovered during road construction in 1900. Today, the Beck Memorial Presbyterian Church stands on the lot. Parcel C is the present West Farms Soldiers Cemetery, while parcel D was taken for the creation of Bryant Avenue during the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**Dates of Activity:** Mid-18<sup>th</sup> century – 1929.

**Source No. 6 – 2020. West Farms Soldier Cemetery, NYC Cemetery Project. Jan 30, 2020**

<https://nycemetery.wordpress.com/2020/01/>

- 40 veterans of four wars—the War of 1812, the Civil War, the Spanish American War, and World War I—are interred here.

- West Farms described as a “flourishing little village’ of about 300 inhabitants” and goes on to state – “The trustees designated part of the second parcel of land, located on the south side of Samuel Street, “a graveyard for strangers and black slaves.”

- Early 20th century – about 200 individuals buried in the “West Farms Cemetery, including 35 Civil War veterans. Most distinguished of these is Captain William J. Rasberry, who led his men into the Battle of Cedar Creek, Virginia, and died there, in 1864.”

- “Grading and widening of streets in West Farms during the first decade of the 20th century disturbed graves in the cemetery next to the old Presbyterian church building as well as in the forgotten paupers’ burial ground on the south side of East 180th Street (Beck Memorial). When the public learned that soldiers graves were being neglected and desecrated in the West Farms. The committee re-dedicated the cemetery as the West Farms Soldier Cemetery in 1910,s Cemetery, a committee was founded to protect the site...”

- 1970s era sign, “West Farms Soldier Cemetery Bronx Landmark...” referred to as a “curious public notice”. Still hangs in 2025.



**QUEER OLD MISS HULLIN.**

**Buried from the Shabby Little House where she had Lived Alone 27 Years.**

Mary M. Hullin, 70 years old, died at Fairmount village, West Farms, on Monday, and was buried yesterday in the West Farms Cemetery at 11 o'clock. The certificate of death, made out by Dr. Lewis of Morrisania, gives the cause of death as “mal-nutrition extending over several years.” “She lived in a dark, damp house,” a marginal note says, “and she was suspicious and obstinate.”

**Source No. 7 – 2025. Oral testimony from longtime community members, Brian Johnson, Ms. Sharman Switzer, Ayanna Chapman, Naima Kadir. Aug 30, 2025**

Eyewitness to History –

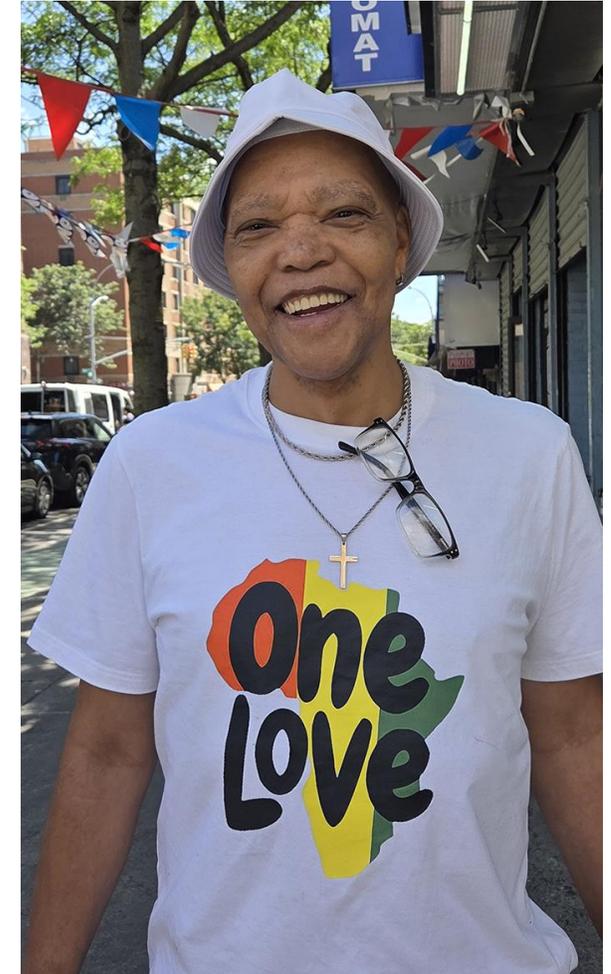
- Lifelong West Farms resident, **Brian Johnson**, currently residing on Honeywell Ave, grew up across the street from Beck Memorial in a building that used to be on Lot A (5), now the site of the Rev. Davis Cassels Houses. Mr. Johnson was a student at PS6 on East Tremont Ave, his mother attended Beck Memorial.

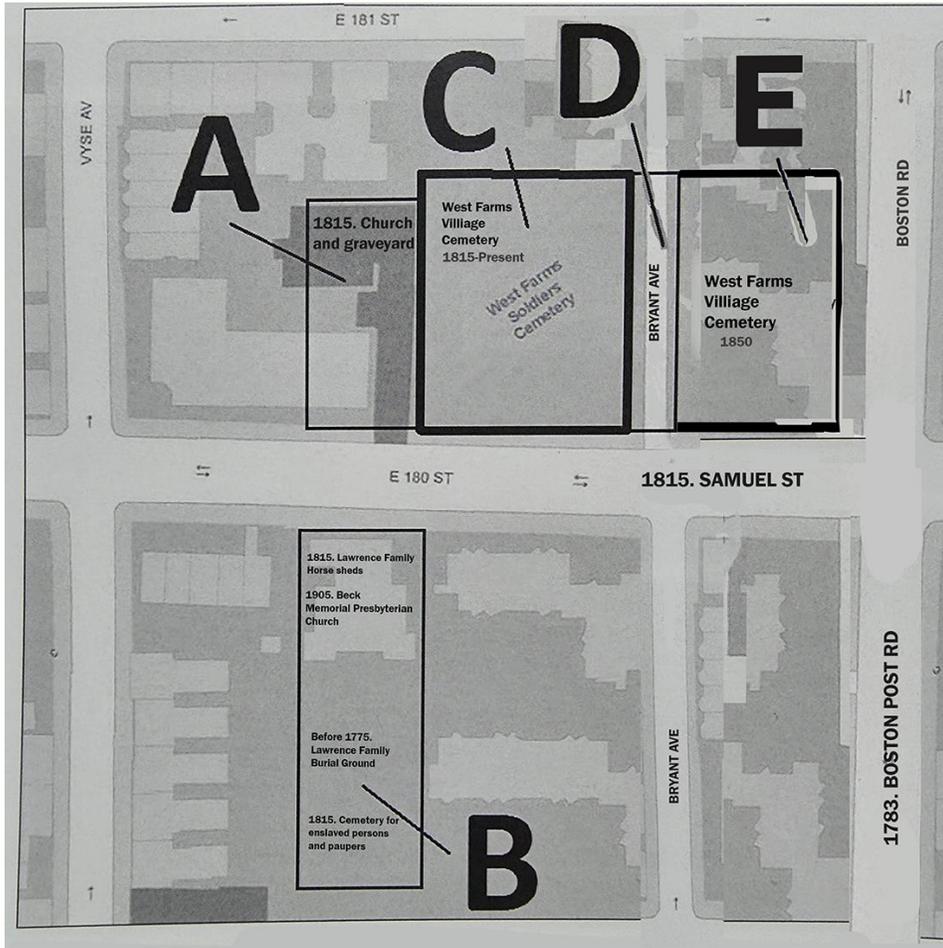
- In the late 1960s, Mr. Johnson remembers playing basketball on a court located on the right side of the church property, and states, “that’s how I got to see the (grave)stones...” He goes on to say, “I know I saw a graveyard”.

- While visiting the pastor’s office, Mr. Johnson remembers seeing a photo of the old wooden church (6).

- Mr. Johnson also recalls that the Veteran’s Cemetery was bigger; this was before Lambert Houses were built, and the lot was vacant.

When asked what he thought about a Memorial Garden to commemorate the enslaved people interred behind the church, Mr. Johnson replied, “I’m one of those people that believe you need things like that, so you don’t forget.”





Updated map from "*The Cemeteries of The Bronx*" by Patrick Raftery, Westchester County Historical Society (5) to include Lot E

**Parcel A –**

Past – 1814, church and burial ground (church destroyed in fire, 1912)  
(1, 2, 3, 4, 5)

1999 - Present – Rev. David Casella Plaza Apt building (7)

**Parcel B –**

Past – ‘Prior to and at the time of the Revolution’ (1775) – Lawrence Family Burial ground (1, 2, 5)

1814 – Present – Enslaved and Pauper’s burial ground (2, 5, 6)

1814-1905 – Horse sheds

1905-Present – Beck Memorial Presbyterian Church and Graveyard (4, 5)

**Parcel C –**

1815 (first interment) to Present – Village Cemetery, Soldier’s Cemetery, West Farms Soldier’s Cemetery (3, 5, 6, 7)

**Parcel D –**

1827 – Private Cemetery opened by John Butler (2, 5)

1900 -1954 – Bryant Ave, city street (3, 5, 7)

1973 - Present – Bryant Ave walkway at Lambert Houses (7)

**Parcel E –**

Before 1850 – Private Cemetery owned by John Butler (2)

After 1850 – Private Cemetery opened by Alfred Pettit (2)

1973 - Present – Phipps’ Lambert Houses (2, 7)

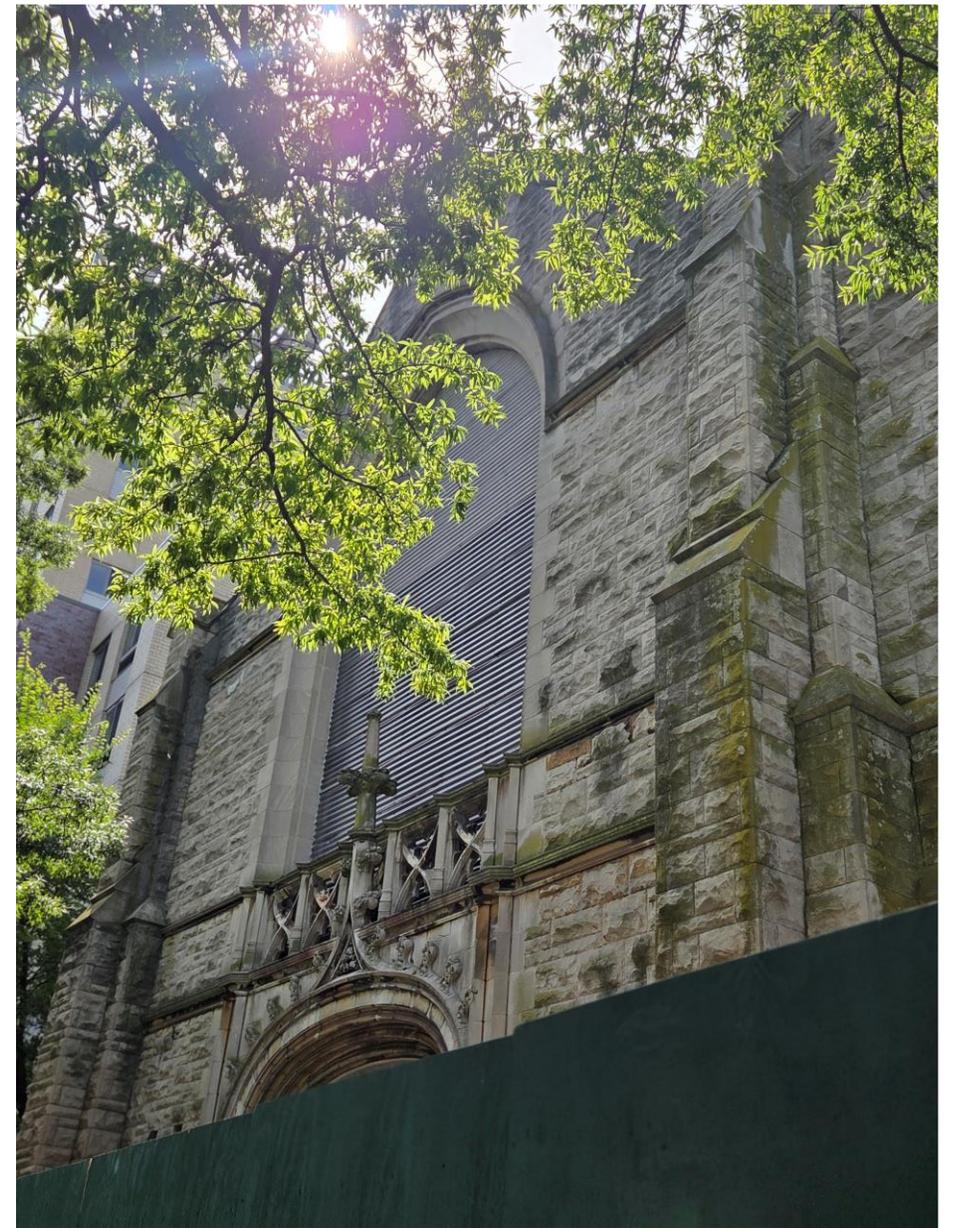
**WEST FARMS  
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PRESENT DAY – I-r Lot A on "The Cemeteries of The Bronx" map - Rev. Davis Casella Plaza is an elderly low-income housing apartment building subsidized by the federal governments HUD (Housing and Urban Development Division), Lot C on map - Veterans Cemetery, Lot D Bryant Ave pathway at Lambert Houses.

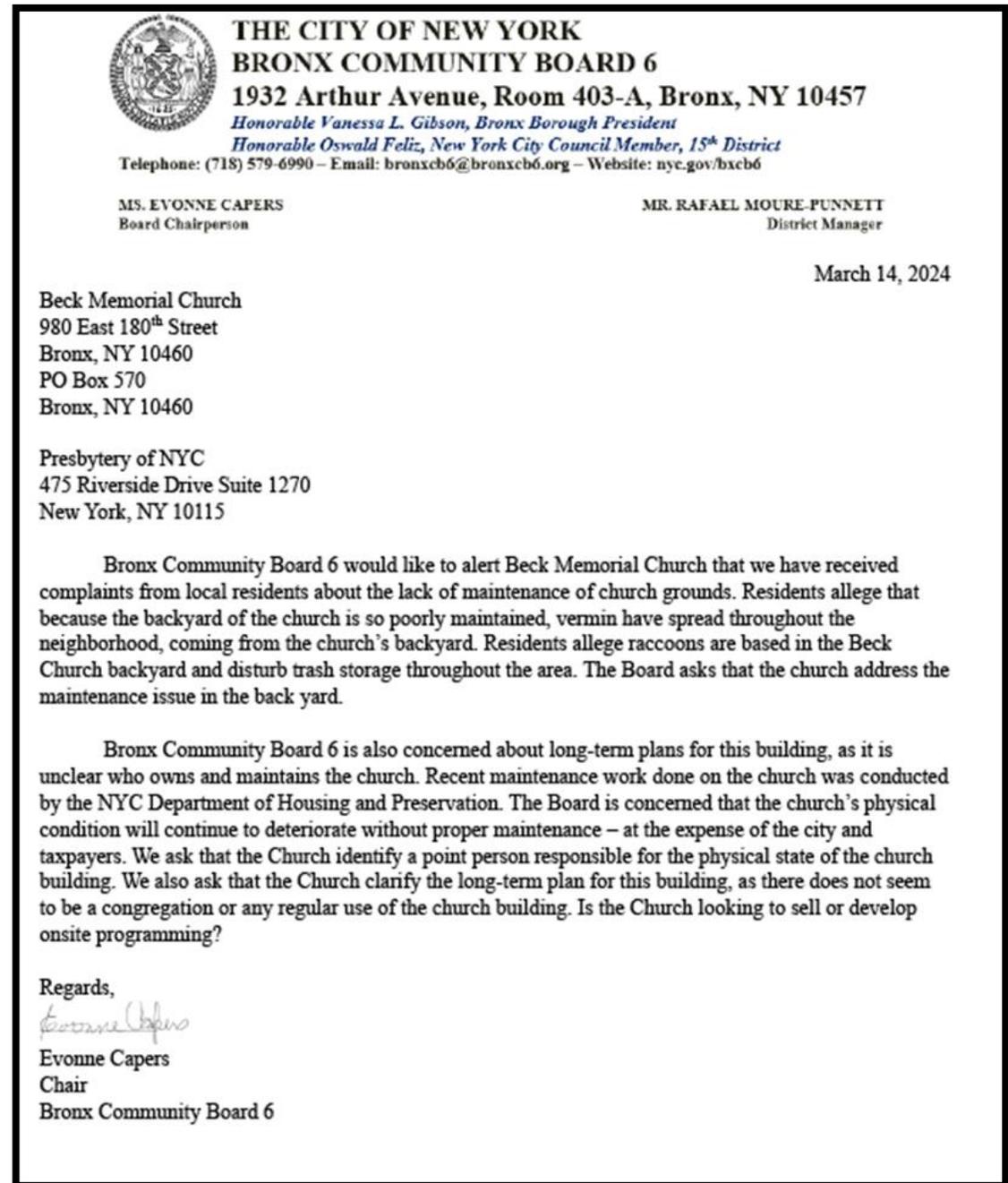
“The slave and pauper’s graveyard was forgotten until it was uncovered during road construction in 1900. Today, the Beck Memorial Presbyterian Church stands on the lot.”

The Cemeteries of The Bronx" by Patrick Raftery,  
Westchester County Historical Society



# Beck Memorial Today

In **March 2024**, after complaints by community members, Bronx CB6 sent a letter to Beck Memorial Church asking the church to “address the maintenance issue in the back yard”. We also expressed concerns “about the long-term plans” for the building.



**July 14, 2025** – A fire breaks out at 4PM in the yard behind the church. News describes the property as “abandoned”.  
<https://bronx.news12.com/fire-destroys-abandoned-church-in-west-farms>

## Beck Memorial Today

**Feb 11, 2025.** Developer presents a proposal to CB6 to build housing in the church yard. 13 story building. Board rejects proposal, prefers coops or condos. Although the proposal includes the need for historic preservation, it does not mention the graveyard.

### “Historic Preservation

From the outset, we identified the existing church building as a significant historical structure and important community asset worth preserving. Unfortunately, the building has been abandoned for some time and is in serious disrepair. It seems the nave has been partially demolished and is not viable to preserve the remaining portion, so we are focusing our efforts on the most distinctive features of the building: the façade, entryway and belfry. To this end, we are earmarking \$3,000,000 for site improvements and restoration of the historic structure to be preserved. We believe that despite the high cost involved, a considerable effort is warranted to revitalize this important piece of architectural beauty for the benefit of our tenants and the community at large.”

**Historic Preservation**

The Beacon Apartments project contemplates using the site currently occupied by the Beck Memorial Presbyterian Church. This congregation in what was then West Farms Village in 1815, and after various facility upgrades over the years, the final and current church building was erected in 1905 in a Gothic Revival style. Its ornate facade and commanding tower have been a neighborhood landmark ever since.

From the outset, we identified the existing church building as a significant historical structure and important community asset worth preserving. Unfortunately, the building has been abandoned for some time and is in serious disrepair. It seems the nave has been partially demolished and is not viable to preserve the remaining portion, so we are focusing our efforts on the most distinctive features of the building: the façade, entryway and belfry. To this end, we are earmarking \$3,000,000 for site improvements and restoration of the historic structure to be preserved. We believe that despite the high cost involved, a considerable effort is warranted to revitalize this important piece of architectural beauty for the benefit of our tenants and the community at large.



Original 1815 church building.

Current building, pictured in 1928.

Belfry.

Entryway.

Façade.

Nave (partially demolished) and transept.

NYU VIDA 17

- Final Proposal, THE BEACON APARTMENTS, 980 E 180th Street, The Bronx, NY 10460. Bank of America Low-Income Housing Challenge 2023, NYU Schack Institute of Real Estate, NYU VIDA Team

In their proposal, social developers NYU VIDA and leading real estate development firm MDG Design + Construction plan to convert “a blighted church property into an innovative 116-unit affordable housing development with community facility space focused on sustainability, community support, and historical preservation.”

**“Acquisition Risk:** The Church has an existing building that is currently unused but is likely recognized as an important community landmark. The congregation is willing deliver the site in exchange for a turn key project that would benefit the community, primarily focused on low income housing. The main risk is the Church not delivering the premises under a Ground Lease option.”

The report lists Lambert Houses, ultimately with 278 affordable units, and Compass 1, with 237 units as “some comparable modern affordable housing developments in the surrounding area.”

**WEST FARMS  
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- Final Proposal, THE BEACON APARTMENTS, 980 E 180th Street, The Bronx, NY 10460. Bank of America Low-Income Housing Challenge 2023, NYU Schack Institute of Real Estate, NYU VIDA Team

**2. THE MARKET**  
**Bronx Community District 6 and West Farms**

Community District 6 covers 1.5 square miles in the central Bronx, serving the communities of Belmont, Bathgate, Tremont, and West Farms. According to the 2018 American Community Survey, the population was 175,456. Bronx CB 6 is primarily populated by low-income residents; with an unemployment rate of 23.9% and has the second-highest percentage residents under the age of 18 at 28.4%. 60% of residents receive some form of income assistance and 30-34% of residents live under the NYC poverty line. CB 6 district had the 2nd highest private residential eviction filing rate, the 3rd highest housing code violation rate, and 7th highest crime rate in NYC. Also has the 2nd highest number of homeless shelters.



As of 2024, the median income was about \$24,800 per year. The majority of West Farms properties are small apartments (studio to two bedrooms) or high-rise (three or four bedrooms) or small apartment buildings. A majority of the West Farms neighborhood's residential property



NYU VIDA

Ms. Sharman Switzer has called West Farms her home for over fifty years. A former teacher, she is the impetus for our current exploration of this site.

On a recent visit to River Garden, Ms. Switzer, hearing that garden manager, Laura James, was also on the community board, informed James of the oral history she had from Mr. Brian Johnson (7), and asked if the CB could look into it.

She went on to explain that her granddaughter, 22-year-old Ayanna Chatman, and her daughter, Naima Qadir, were also interested in the site, since they lived nearby and regularly walked near the church. They did some research on the internet and found out that the building has a graveyard behind it, along with other information.

After that, they had an opportunity to speak with the caretaker of the church, who they happened to see one day. Naima went on to recall the conversation. When they asked him what the plans were for the site, he said, to his knowledge, the building would be torn down and replaced with senior housing. This was at least nine years ago. (7)



Sharman Switzer, Naima Qadir, Ayanna Chatman

Any new construction in the graveyard behind Beck Memorial would disturb bones, and old growth trees.

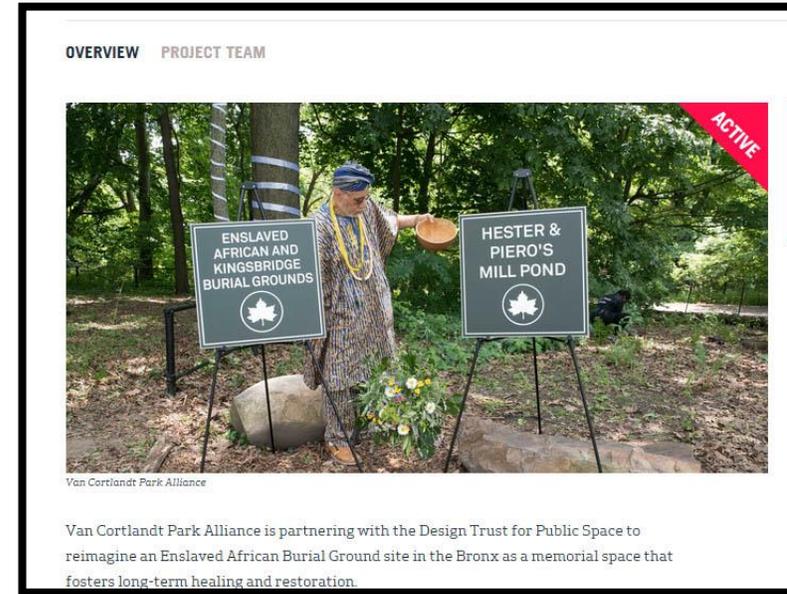


# Enslaved Persons Burial Grounds in the Bronx

## Van Cortlandt Park: Enslaved African Burial Ground

<https://www.nycgovparks.org/parks/VanCortlandtPark/highlights/19847>

“Located along the eastern edge of the Kingsbridge Burial Ground, this area has been identified as a burial site of enslaved Africans who lived on the Van Cortlandt family plantation. They were responsible for its functions and economic gains for over a hundred years. According to records, there were several Indigenous people who were enslaved as well.” – NYC Parks website



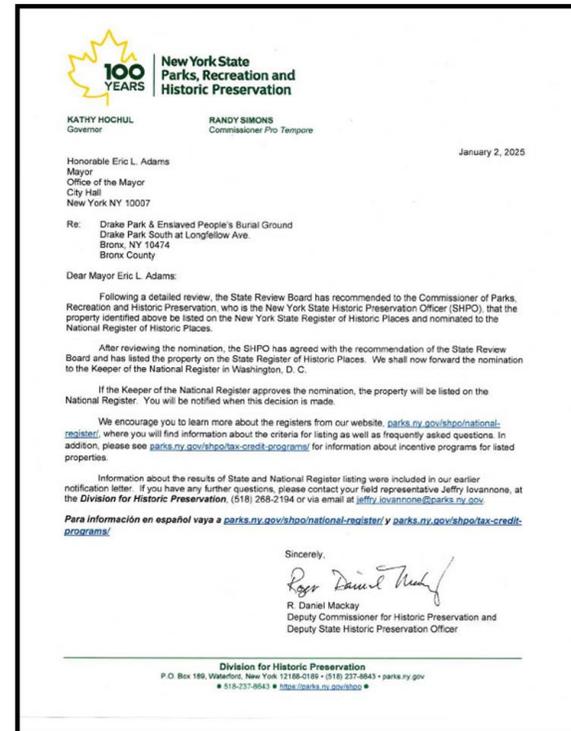
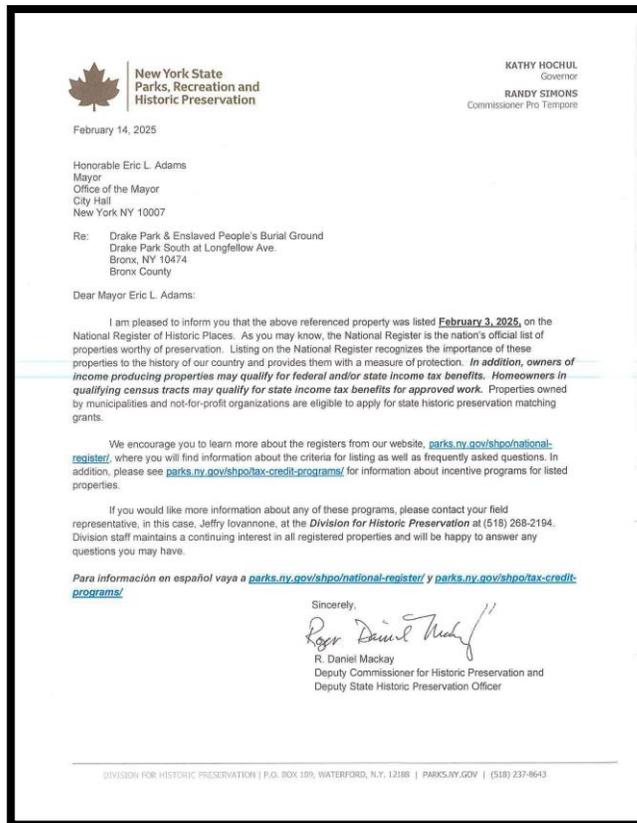
WEST FARMS  
MEMORIAL GARDENS

# HUNTS POINT SLAVE BURIAL GROUND <https://hpsbg.weebly.com/>

“The Hunts Point Slave Burial Ground Project seeks to definitively locate and commemorate the lives of slaves that lived in Hunts Point, Bronx, New York. Though the graves may have been obliterated their lives shall be remembered. The project works with students from PS 48, a New York City public school, alongside local historians, community organizations, museums, city agencies to investigate the final resting place of the slaves from various historical and prominent New York families.” <https://vimeo.com/51333842>



PS 48 students and teachers at HPSBG site.  
Photo: Richard Harbus for New York Daily News



WEST FARMS  
MEMORIAL GARDENS

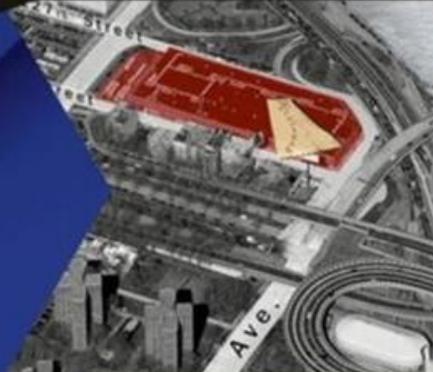
Hunts Point Slave Burial Ground  
listed on the National and NYS  
Registers of Historic Places, 2025

*"The past is not dead, it's not even past."* William Faulkner

## NYC African Burial Ground City Wide Convening at the Schomburg Center, Harlem. June 2025

WEST FARMS  
MEMORIAL GARDENS

The Harlem African Burial Ground, pictured below, was discovered beneath the former MTA Regional Bus Depot on 126th Street and 2nd Avenue in 2015.



### New York City African Burial Ground CITY WIDE CONVENING

**Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture**  
515 Malcolm X Blvd, New York, NY 10037

#### HONORING NEW YORK CITY'S SACRED GROUND

Hear from panelists representing African burial grounds across New York City as they share the triumphs and challenges of preserving sacred African burial sites.

Together, we'll honor legacy, explore shared histories, and celebrate the ongoing work of cultural preservation.

#### EXPLORING HARLEM'S LEGACY AND HERITAGE

- COMMUNITY DIALOGUE
- PANEL DISCUSSION
- CROSS-CULTURAL EXCHANGE
- HISTORICAL REFLECTIONS

**June 17, 2025**  
6:30 PM - 8:00 PM

Presented By

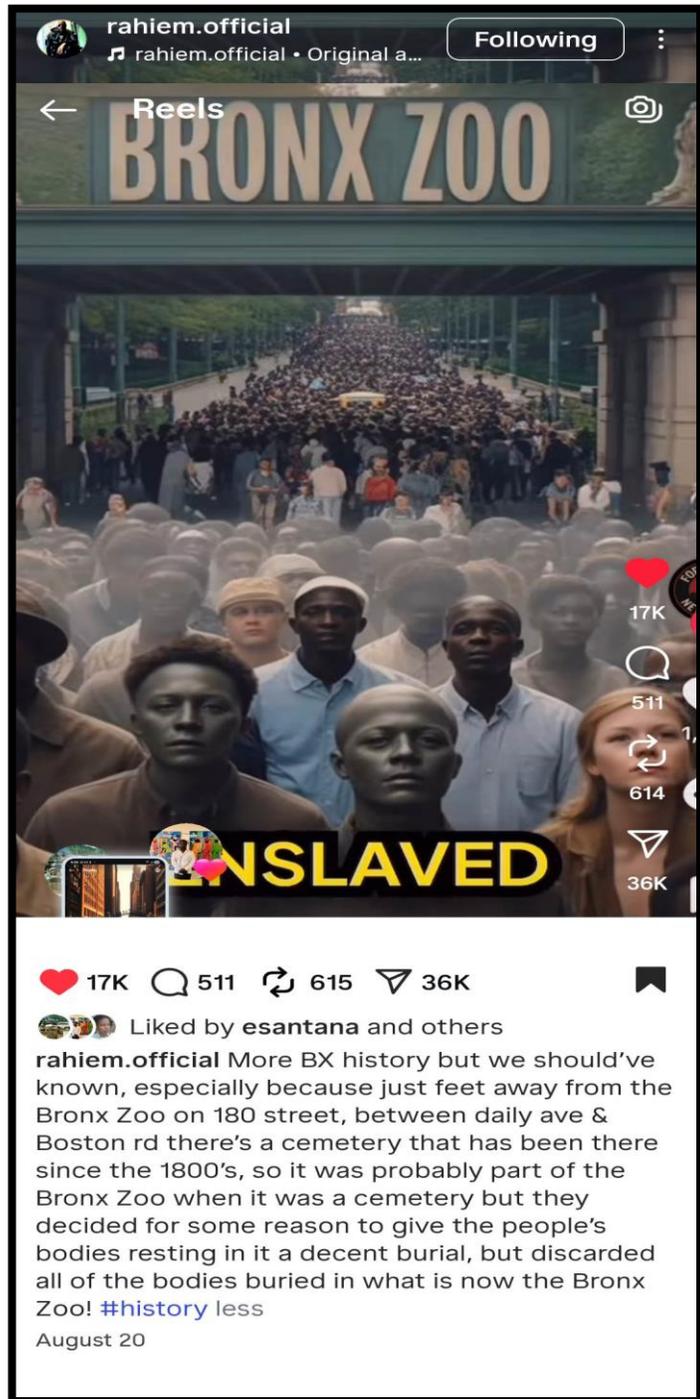
NYC/EDC  NAACP National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

For More Information  
edc.nyc/habg  
Instagram: @HarlemAfricanBurialGround



Local project honoring Indigenous peoples of the Bronx – Harmony Hill native garden and wigwam at Bronx River Community Garden, E 180th and Devoe Ave, West Farms, one block east of WFPC. August 2025



Instagram post. August 20, 2025

17K 
 511 
 615 
 36K

Liked by **esantana** and others

**rahiem.official** More BX history but we should've known, especially because just feet away from the Bronx Zoo on 180 street, between daily ave & Boston rd there's a cemetery that has been there since the 1800's, so it was probably part of the Bronx Zoo when it was a cemetery but they decided for some reason to give the people's bodies resting in it a decent burial, but discarded all of the bodies buried in what is now the Bronx Zoo! [#history](#) less

August 20

WEST FARMS  
MEMORIAL GARDENS

When asked if he had any knowledge of bodies buried at the Bronx Zoo, Patrick Raftery, librarian at the WCHS and author of "The Cemeteries of The Bronx" replied, "I don't recall ever coming across mention of a burial ground where the Bronx Zoo is today." Aug 28, 2025

“What strikes me about this proposed memorial site in West Farms, we know there are human remains in the ground, but we do not know the names of those buried there. I can't help but compare this to Ground Zero after September 11th, where my brother died at the World Trade Center. In that case, we know Bill's name, we know he died there—but we do not have his remains.

In West Farms, the situation is almost the opposite: we have the bones, but not the names. But in both cases, what feels essential is the same—the creation of a sacred space where lives are honored, even when bones, or names, are missing.

The West Farms Memorial Garden would serve as that sacred space. Even though we may not know the names of those buried there, we know they were human beings—and among them, people who were enslaved. Just as we honor the memory of those who perished at Ground Zero, we must choose how to honor these lives, and in doing so, decide what memory, history, and the sacred mean to us as a community.”

- Colleen Kelly, Bronx resident

“I agree with making this a memorial. In communities like ours, there are very few spaces where people can gather and feel connected—whether to each other, to the past, or to the present. I think having something like this here would be really meaningful.

Growing up, walking past this cemetery was normal for me. I was never afraid of it. But at the same time, I didn't really know the history—it was just always there in front of us. That's why my grandmother, my mom, and I were so interested when we learned more about it. Something like this doesn't happen often, where history is uncovered in such a powerful way.

If there are people ready to take on this work, I feel like we're definitely ready to support it however we can.”

- Ayanna Chatman, West Farms resident

# COMMUNITY CENTER

Additionally, we propose that the building owners rent the church building to Justice For Families, an organization currently located two blocks east of the church at 2115 Honeywell Ave, to support their ongoing work while strengthening community partnerships.

Besides Justice for Families, other small non-profit and grassroots organizations will occupy office space on a sliding scale basis, and share common spaces, including an auditorium, kitchen, technology room, and studio.



The correlation between slavery and the incarceration of Black people is rooted in the historical legacy of racial discrimination and systemic oppression. After the abolition of slavery, policies like the Black Codes and later the War on Drugs disproportionately targeted Black communities, leading to high incarceration rates. The 13th Amendment, while abolishing slavery, allowed for "involuntary servitude" as punishment for crime, which became a loophole exploited to criminalize Black people, perpetuating a cycle of racial inequality and economic disenfranchisement. This connection continues today through practices that disproportionately affect Black individuals in the criminal justice system.

**Justice for Families** supports youth and families impacted by the justice system. This national organization, headquartered in the Bronx with a dedicated learning hub, is led by Executive Director Jeannette Bocanegra, who brings nearly 40 years of experience to the work. She has partnered with leaders locally and nationally, conducting research and pushing for change in how children and their families are treated by the justice system. The organization advocates alongside families, including accompanying them to court.

The Bronx chapter also runs women's groups, intergenerational cooking classes, Know Your Rights workshops for young people, community navigator training, and advocacy efforts around improving schools, expanding access to mental health care, and securing stable housing.

As Mrs. Bocanegra explains, "This is one of those million-dollar zip codes that is a revolving door for incarceration. It's a revolving door for a system that separates children from their families and feeds the child welfare system. This area has a high rate of children being removed from their homes, from their parents and placed in other places, causing more trauma. Our goal is really to strengthen families and their capacity to keep their community safe, so everyone has an opportunity to develop."

# Justice For Families in the community

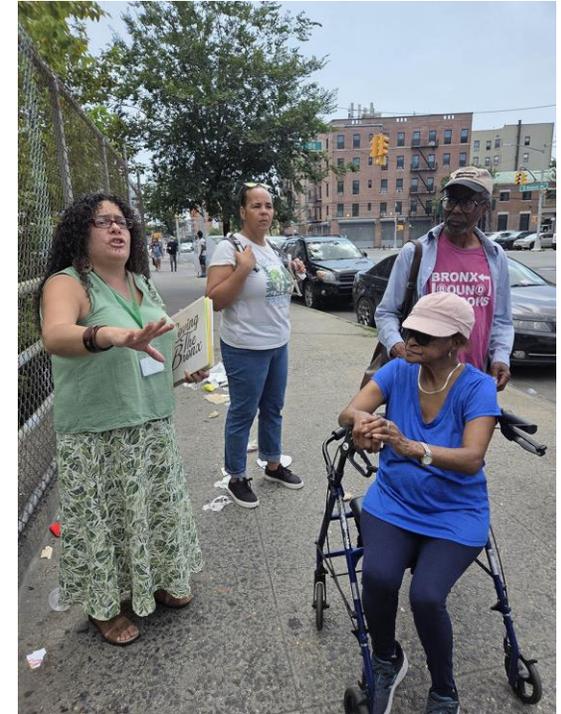




**Jeannette Bocanegra**, is a lifelong Bronxite and 2022 David Prize finalist, serves as the Executive Director of the Bronx Chapter of this 501(c)(3) organization. A tireless advocate for families impacted by the juvenile justice system, Jeannette draws on her own journey as a parent, PTA leader, and mother who once felt powerless when her own child became justice-involved. Since 2020, she has led Justice 4 Families, a nonprofit that equips families and organizations to navigate NYC agencies and systems in support of their children.

**“Nilka Martell** is a parks advocate, writer, and founder of Loving the Bronx. She also serves as the board chair of the Bronx River Alliance and president of the Friends of Pelham Bay Park. An environmentalist and community advocate, she has significantly contributed to the revitalization of the Bronx River and surrounding areas. Through Loving The Bronx and the Bronx River Alliance, Nilka mobilizes volunteers for cleanup and conservation projects, fostering a sense of community and environmental stewardship. As she explained in a recent Urban Omnibus article, she also leads a campaign to cap the Cross Bronx Expressway, convert it into green space, and end the flow of pollution from the Cross Bronx into surrounding neighborhoods.”

<https://archleague.org/event/nilka-martell-person-place-thing-with-randy-cohen/>





Laura James *American History*, 2001

**Laura James** has been a resident of West Farms, just a few blocks from Beck Memorial, for the past 22 years. “I love my neighborhood and was proud to help establish the Lambert Houses Tenant Association. I also manage the Bronx River Community Garden at Devoe and East 180th Street.” Due to term limits, this is her final term serving with Community Board 6.

In addition to her community work, Laura James is a working artist and independent curator. For many years, her paintings have explored themes of race and class in America and the Caribbean. The first piece in this ongoing series, titled *American History*, was created in 2001 after she read about the brutal killing of a Black man who was dragged to death behind a truck in Texas.

“Beck Memorial has long been a place of mystery for me and my neighbors. Now that I know the history, that enslaved Black people are buried on this spot, I feel honored that this site is part of my community, and I am grateful for the chance to help ensure it is treated with the respect it deserves.”

- 1 – 1814. Deed where Presbyterian church acquires the land, Westchester County Historical
- 2 – 1954. The Old Village of West Farms, by Stephen Wray (of American History Club- New Rochelle), Westchester County Historical Society
- 3 – 1967. Landmarks Preservation Commission, Old West Farms Soldier Cemetery, 2013 Bryant Ave and E180 St, Borough of The Bronx. 1815. Aug 2, 1967 <https://s-media.nyc.gov/agencies/lpc/lp/0624.pdf>
- 4 – 2014. Historic Bronx Parks: A Guide to Historic NY Neighborhoods. Historic District Councils.
- 5 – 2016. The Cemeteries of The Bronx by Patrick Raftery, Westchester County Historical Society
- 6 – 2020. West Farms Soldier Cemetery, NYC Cemetery Project. Jan 30, 2020  
<https://nycemetery.wordpress.com/2020/01/>
- 7 – 2025. Oral testimony from longtime community members, Brian Johnson, Ms. Sharman, Ayanna Chapman, Naima Kadir. Aug 30, 2025
- 8 – 2025. Updated Map from “The Cemeteries of The Bronx” by Patrick Raftery, Westchester County Historical Society to include Lot E
- 9 – Blacks in the Colonial Bronx: A Documentary History Paperback – Jan 4,2010 by Lloyd Ultan

10 – 15 Disturbing and Shameful Facts About the Bronx Zoo’s 1906 Human Exhibit. By Shallom Joe / May 5, 2025

<https://dailyfetch.net/the-bronx-zoo-secret-theyve-been-hiding-for-decades-15-facts-about-human-exhibit-gone-wrong/>

11 – Human Zoos: The Western World’s Shameful Secret, 1900-1958

<https://rarehistoricalphotos.com/human-zoo-history-pictures-1900-1958/>

12 – Community Board letter to Beck Memorial Church. March 14, 2024

<https://cbbronx.cityofnewyork.us/cb6/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2024/03/Beck-Memorial-Church.pdf>

13 – Fire Destroys Abandoned West Farms Church. Bronx News 12

<https://bronx.news12.com/fire-destroys-abandoned-church-in-west-farms>

14 - Final Proposal, THE BEACON APARTMENTS, 980 E 180th Street, The Bronx, NY 10460. Bank of America Low-Income Housing Challenge 2023, NYU Schack Institute of Real Estate, NYU VIDA Team

15 – Van Cortlandt Park: Enslaved African Burial Ground

<https://www.nycgovparks.org/parks/VanCortlandtPark/highlights/19847>

16 – Hunts Point Slave Burial Ground <https://hpsbg.weebly.com>

17 – Burial ground video <https://vimeo.com/51333842>

18 – Hunts Point Bural Ground listed on the National and NYS Registers of Historic Places, 2025 <https://hpsbg.weebly.com>

**WEST FARMS  
MEMORIAL GARDENS**