



New York City Council  
Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries and International Intergroup Relations

Oversight Hearing: Commemorating Juneteenth and Honoring Burial Sites of Formerly Enslaved African Americans

Wednesday, March 13, 2026, 1:00PM – 250 Broadway - 8th Floor - Hearing Room 1

**Testimony Presented by NYC Department of Cultural Affairs**

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Good afternoon, Deputy Speaker Williams and members of the committee. I am Alton Murray, Deputy Commissioner of the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs. I'm here to testify in regard to today's topics: Commemorating Juneteenth and Honoring Burial Sites of Formerly Enslaved African Americans.

When Juneteenth was made an official federal holiday in 2021, it was 156 years after the last enslaved people learned of their emancipation after the Civil War. It took generations of advocacy for this historic milestone to be more broadly recognized. But five years on, New Yorkers have embraced the opportunity to celebrate, reflect, and come together to continue the unending work of imagining a more inclusive and just society.

The Department of Cultural Affairs is proud to support a wide range of organizations whose programming in honor of Juneteenth is as diverse as our city's cultural sector. Our grantees are bringing performances, workshops, exhibitions, and other community-driven programming for New Yorkers to engage with. Examples include:

- **The Jamaica Center for Arts & Learning (JCAL)** will commemorate Juneteenth with art and film programming that examines the continuing journey toward liberation. JCAL's Juneteenth programming will unfold across its campus and is free and open to the public.
- **Black Spectrum Theatre** will present theatrical programming examining the history and ongoing significance of Juneteenth through dramatic performance and community dialogue.
- **The Studio Museum in Harlem** will mark Juneteenth with a full day of workshops, gallery conversations, performances, and healing-centered programming rooted in Black artistic expression and community care.
- **Snug Harbor Cultural Center & Botanical Garden and the Staten Island Community Alliance** will present the 6th Annual Juneteenth Freedom Festival. This day of

celebration, music, food, and culture is a meaningful way to commemorate and honor the end of slavery in the United States while bringing the community together.

- **Weeksville Heritage Center** will commemorate Juneteenth with liberation-centered talks, archival storytelling, performances, food vendors, and community gathering. Located on the site of one of the nation's first free Black communities, Weeksville's celebration foregrounds Black history, resilience, and cultural memory.
- **New York Botanical Garden** will present programs exploring Black ecology, foodways, healing gardens, and storytelling traditions. The celebration connects environmental education with the histories and cultural practices of the African diaspora.
- **Wave Hill** will host a family-friendly Juneteenth celebration featuring outdoor dance performances, live music, artmaking workshops, and lawn activities set within its public gardens. The program connects Black cultural celebration with nature, creativity, and intergenerational gathering.
- **Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts'** annual Juneteenth edition of *The Tune Up* will bring together spoken word artists, musicians, performers, and audiences for participatory programming centered on Black creativity and liberation.
- **Louis Armstrong House Museum** will celebrate Juneteenth through jazz concerts and garden performances honoring Black musical traditions and the legacy of Louis Armstrong. Programming typically reflects the museum's mission to preserve and interpret jazz history through community engagement.
- **BRIC's** Juneteenth programming includes multidisciplinary Juneteenth programming featuring spoken word, film screenings, DJ sets, multimedia art, and live performance. The celebration highlights contemporary Black artistic voices and Brooklyn-based cultural communities.
- **Flushing Town Hall** plans to celebrate Juneteenth through performances rooted in African diasporic music, jazz, and dance traditions. The event reflects the institution's longstanding commitment to global and community-based arts programming.
- **Queens Museum** will mark Juneteenth with exhibitions and public programs focused on migration, social justice, and community storytelling. The museum's programming often highlights Queens' cultural diversity and histories of collective activism.
- **The Public Theater** will present *Juneteenth: The Musical*, which follows Samuel, a formerly enslaved man who escapes to join the Union Army, and Ruby, the woman he loves and left behind. Blending gospel, spirituals, zydeco, and norteña, this bilingual, dance-driven musical celebrates the origins of America's newest federal holiday—and the ordinary people who forced a nation to keep its promise.

- **The Flea Theater** will commemorate Juneteenth with a weeklong series of free public performances curated by Artistic Director Niegel Smith. Designed as intimate, site-responsive experiences, the performances explore Black liberation through joy, queerness, hope, resistance, and community engagement.
- **Green-Wood Cemetery** will offer free family tours highlighting the lives of notable Black Americans interred there, including Jean-Michel Basquiat, James Weldon Johnson, and Susan Smith McKinney Steward. The tours explore Black history in New York through stories of art, activism, medicine, and military service.
- **Jamel Gaines Creative Outlet** will present Juneteenth performances at Lincoln Center, Wave Hill, and Theatre for a New Audience. Known for combining dance, theater, and African diasporic storytelling, the company's work often centers Black history and cultural memory.
- **651 ARTS** will host its annual free Juneteenth block party celebrating Black artistry, music, dance, and community culture on the plaza outside its campus. Building on past programs featuring protest music, spoken word, step performances, and dance cyphers, the 2026 celebration is expected to showcase a similarly wide-ranging lineup rooted in liberation and collective expression.
- **KowTeff School of African Dance** will present its 16th annual multidisciplinary Juneteenth celebration in Bedford-Stuyvesant, combining African dance, folklore, music, and community education. The event commemorates emancipation while emphasizing healing, artistic empowerment, and opportunities for artists from marginalized communities.
- **Prospect Park Alliance and Danspace Project** will present MAJOR, a dance project by Ogemdi Ude that explores the physicality, history, and interiority of majorette dance. This celebratory Juneteenth performance will transform the iconic Prospect Park Boathouse in a liberatory stage.

Our partners at NYC Parks and NYC Tourism also both have robust lists of programming happening across the city. We're proud of our support, in partnership with the City Council, of this broad range of cultural activity and programming honoring this year's Juneteenth holiday. I'd also like to note that many organizations, especially Black-led organizations, have been celebrating Juneteenth in our city for many years before it became a federal holiday. This is another example of the groups we support leading the way when it comes to programming that is rooted in and accountable to our communities.

Regarding the proposed legislation, we thank you for highlighting the urgent need to think deeply about how we honor burial sites of formerly enslaved African Americans in our city. DCLA's offices are just around the corner from the African Burial Ground National Monument in Lower Manhattan. This marks the site where upwards of 15,000 intact remains of enslaved and free Africans who lived and worked in colonial New York were found during the

construction of a federal building. Through our Percent for Art program, DCLA commissioned artist Lorenzo Pace's soaring "Triumph of the Human Spirit," just a few steps away in Foley Square, to honor and draw attention to this important site. In Harlem, we're supporting the efforts of the NYC Economic Development Corporation to commission a permanent monument and cultural space honoring an African burial ground found under a longtime MTA bus depot. In Brooklyn, the Flatbush African Burial Ground was in use from the 17th to 19th century. After community members advocated for the site to be preserved as open space, it was transferred from HPD to NYC Parks in 2022. With funding support from the Council, and in close consultation with the local community, NYC Parks is undertaking a capital project to design and build a park space that commemorates and honors the site's history. The written testimony submitted today from the Landmarks Preservation Committee includes information on a number of other burial grounds that are preserved and honored across the city.

Collectively, these sites tell the stories of the members of the African diaspora who came to our city – often in bondage – who laid the foundations of the flourishing Black culture that defines so many parts of our city today. As note in the written testimony of our colleagues at the Landmarks Preservation Commission, "The tragic national pattern of disregard for African American burial grounds left most uncounted, unprotected, and rarely documented on maps." LPC raises other valid concerns, such as the risk of looting and vandalism that may result from public disclosure of unmarked archaeological sites. This work should only be undertaken in consultation with descendant communities, who in some cases may find disclosure appropriate or, in other cases, prefer to keep the location of the site private to protect it.

While we share your commitment to honoring the legacy of our African ancestors who lived and died here, DCLA is likely not the best agency to lead on this work. We are primarily a funding agency, and we do not have the in-house expertise or resources to do or oversee this kind of historical land assessment with the care and precision it deserves and demands. But as we have with other African burial sites, we would be honored to work to commission commemorative monuments and artwork when sites are identified and capital projects initiated, and more broadly to support these efforts in collaboration with our grantees who have relevant expertise.

We look forward to further conversations about the best and most effective ways to accomplish our shared goals of more fully honoring and recognizing these sites. And the weeks leading up to Juneteenth offer us an ideal moment to have this important conversation. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I'm happy to answer any questions you might have.

May 13, 2026

Deputy Speaker Dr. Nantasha Williams  
Chair, Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries and International Relations  
New York City Council  
250 Broadway Suite 1734  
New York, NY 10007

Council Member Kamillah Hanks  
New York City Council  
250 Broadway, Suite 1878  
New York, NY 10007

Re: Int. No. 0220-2026

Dear Deputy Speaker Dr. Williams and Council Member Hanks:

I am writing on behalf of the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) regarding Int. No. 0220-2026 on the identification of formerly enslaved African American burial sites. LPC is committed to preserving and protecting the places that help tell the story of New York City's Black communities and shares the belief in the importance of recognizing the burial sites of formerly enslaved African Americans. These sites serve as powerful reminders of a painful period in New York history, during which enslaved African people helped build the city, only to have their stories and final resting places remain anonymous and erased from the landscape, and our agency is proud to have preserved several such sites as New York City landmarks.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our comments on the proposed legislation. The topic of unmarked burial grounds is incredibly complex because it involves dealing with extremely old, underground resources that were largely undocumented at the time. The identification, interpretation, and protection of historic burial grounds involves complex archeological and historic research and investigation, and compliance with a number of regulatory requirements stemming from federal, state, and local laws. With that as background, we have the following comments.

### **LPC's Role in Archaeology**

LPC is named in the legislation as an advisor to the Department of Cultural Affairs (DCLA) on developing and implementing a plan to survey and identify unmarked enslaved African American burial sites. LPC's Archaeology Department is very small, consisting of two staff members, and its work is primarily limited to providing technical assistance to other City agencies on archaeological issues related to city, state, and federal environmental review, typically for rezonings or development projects. This includes reviewing documentation submitted by archaeologists in support of such work, but LPC staff do not undertake fieldwork, which is most often done by private-sector archaeologists. As noted below, such work is typically required to identify the presence and location of burials and burial grounds. I would also note that LPC's purview does not include subsurface work for projects on private property, in most circumstances.

### **Identifying Locations and Determining Boundaries**

The bill proposes that DCLA maintain a list of all known burial sites of formerly enslaved African Americans and locate any currently unmarked burial sites, among other actions. The tragic national pattern of disregard for African American burial grounds left most uncounted, unprotected, and rarely documented on maps. Because of this inequity and the imprecision of old maps, it is very difficult for experts in the field to identify the locations and boundaries of burial grounds, as well as the identities of the people who were buried at these sites. Therefore, the presence and boundaries of historic burial grounds can be challenging to establish definitively without in-ground investigation by professionals with resources beyond the scope of City government. Determining whether burials are present is an extremely complex, invasive, and expensive process, which almost always requires archaeological testing, and landowner permission and funding would be needed to do that testing.

### **Looting and Site Disturbance**

The bill proposes maintaining publicly accessible information regarding burial site locations, including through an interactive online map. Public disclosure of unknown or unmarked archaeological site locations raises serious concerns about looting, vandalism, and site disturbance. Public disclosure of burial sites should be undertaken in consultation with descendant communities, who in some cases may find disclosure appropriate or, in other cases, prefer to keep the location of the site private to protect it.

### **Education**

LPC applauds the intent to create an educational campaign to inform residents about formerly enslaved African American burial sites. To avoid issues related to looting and site disturbances, we recommend that the educational campaign be focused on known sites. LPC has designated important sites as New York City landmarks, including the African Burial Ground and Commons Historic District in Lower Manhattan, Joseph Rodman Drake Park and Enslaved People's Burial Ground in the Bronx, and the Enslaved People's Burial Ground in Crown Heights. In addition, there are sites listed on the National Register of Historic Places, including the Harlem African Burial Ground, and places such as Sankofa Park, the Flatbush African Burial Ground, and the Van Cortlandt Park Enslaved Burial Ground, which are publicly identified and in the care of NYC Parks. At these sites, archaeological testing has already taken place, typically when a site is undergoing development, and the presence of human remains has been verified. These are places that could serve as sources of enhanced public education and awareness and should be developed in consultation with descendant communities to ensure their history is presented respectfully and accurately.

Thank you for your work in addressing this critical issue, and for your consideration of these comments.

Sincerely,



Lisa Kersavage, Executive Director  
NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission

cc: Diya Vij, Commissioner, NYC Department of Cultural Affairs



**JUMAANE D. WILLIAMS**

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**STATEMENT OF PUBLIC ADVOCATE JUMAANE D. WILLIAMS TO  
THE NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL COMMITTEE ON CULTURAL AFFAIRS  
MAY 13, 2026**

My name is Jumaane D. Williams, and I am the Public Advocate for the City of New York. I want to thank Chair Williams and the members of the Committee on Cultural Affairs for holding this important hearing.

New York City's and our entire country's vast wealth was built on the backs of human beings kidnapped and forced to labor against their will. Although New York emancipated enslaved African Americans earlier than the country as a whole, the reverberations of that heinous crime unfortunately live on today. Black New Yorkers still hold less wealth, are more heavily policed, have less access to high-quality services, and are leaving the city at higher than average rates.<sup>1</sup>

We are living through a dark moment in our country's history. We are seeing in real time state and national efforts to prevent the teaching of Black history, including the history of enslavement, and simultaneously disenfranchisement of Black Americans by redistricting our power away. In these uncertain times, it is more important than ever that New York City's government leads in educating ourselves and our neighbors on the history of slavery, which is the history of America.

For that reason, I strongly encourage this Committee and the Council to pass Council Member Hanks' bill, [Introduction 220](#), to identify and publicize the locations of burial sites holding formerly enslaved African Americans. Teaching real history means highlighting and uncovering brutal truths that have been lost, which often means

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<sup>1</sup> Data Collaborative for Justice, [Racial and Neighborhood Disparities in New York City Criminal Summons Practices](#); Fiscal Policy Institute, [Who is Leaving New York State? Part II: Social Characteristics](#), 2024.



**JUMAANE D. WILLIAMS**

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deliberately hidden. The burial ground at 290 Broadway, which holds the bodies of close to 15,000 enslaved Africans, was recovered just 35 years ago. It took over a decade to open an official monument commemorating that spot. Intro. 220 will ensure that the city works quickly and proactively to fully account for such burial sites across our city, and honor those that the recorders of our history too often choose to forget.<sup>2</sup>

Council Member Hanks' important legislation builds on our city's past leadership in this area, including the passage of [Local Law 94 of 2024](#), which I championed in order to place an informational sign marking the site of New York's first slave market. Intro. 220 is a vital step towards ensuring New Yorkers are equipped to understand how slavery shaped our city. In order to learn from the past, we have to first acknowledge it.

It's also important to highlight the bright spots in our past, as well as our present. To that end, I'd also like to express support for bills from Council Members Farías, Riley, and Williams. Resolution 82 would celebrate the immense contributions of Italian New Yorkers by recognizing the Feast of San Gennaro and the Ferragosto Festival. By declaring April 28 as Willie Colón Day, resolution 440 highlights the musician and community leader's resounding cultural impact here and across the globe. Designating January 5th as Kappa Alpha Psi day, as Council Member Riley's resolution 424 does, will rightfully spotlight one of the nation's oldest Black Greek Letter Organizations and its many contributions to our city. And last, but certainly not least, I'm proud to support resolution 450 creating Maria Antonia Cay Day on June 28 to honor Toñita's 50-plus year effort to uplift the Puerto Rican community in Williamsburg and beyond.

Thank you.

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Blakey, [New York City's African Burial Ground](#), Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History.



## BROOKLYN PUBLIC LIBRARY

**Oversight Hearing:** Commemorating Juneteenth and  
Honoring Burial Sites of Formerly Enslaved African Americans

Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries and International Relations

May 13, 2026



*Renderings of the New Lots Library courtesy of MASS Design Group and Marble Fairbanks Architects*

Good afternoon. My name is Edwin Maxwell, and I am the Chief Librarian of Brooklyn Public Library. Thank you to Speaker Julie Menin, Deputy Speaker Dr. Nantasha Williams, and members of the Committee for the opportunity to testify today on the recognition of African Burial Grounds in New York City. We are proud to be working alongside Council Member Chris Banks on a major library project to honor the history of the East New York African Burial Ground. I should note that this project is of special importance to me: I served as Branch Manager of New Lots Library earlier in my career, and this neighborhood has stayed with me ever since.

Before anything else, the East New York African Burial Ground is a sacred site — the resting place of free and enslaved Africans buried generations ago. It sits beneath both Sankofa Park and beneath the site where Brooklyn Public Library is building a new library to replace the outdated New Lots branch. For much of recent history, this African Burial Ground's story was known only in fragments, passed down through neighborhood memory — until community leaders brought it fully into the light.

Local leaders Catherine Greene and Eleanor Pinckney were able to do this. Through archival research — drawing on historic maps and newspaper articles housed at the Othmer Library, now part of Brooklyn Public Library's Center for Brooklyn History — they documented this site's history and fought for its public recognition. Their efforts, carried out alongside elected officials and neighborhood leaders, led to the renaming of the area as African Burial Ground Square and the renovation of Sankofa Park as a place of remembrance and reflection.

Brooklyn Public Library is now replacing the existing New Lots branch with a new building designed by MASS Design Group and Marble Fairbanks, with landscape design by Elizabeth Kennedy Landscape Architect. Each of these firms brings particular expertise to this project: MASS Design Group has pioneered the reimagining of spaces of public memory — including the National Memorial for Peace and Justice — with a practice centered on how design can make justice visible and foster collective healing; Marble Fairbanks brings deep experience building libraries here in New York City, including the new Greenpoint Library and Environmental Education Center; and Elizabeth Kennedy's prior work includes the African Burial Ground National Monument in Lower Manhattan and Weeksville Heritage Center in Brooklyn.

In their designs, a veil wraps the exterior of the building and appears to lift at the entrance, an architectural gesture honoring the way Ms. Greene, Ms. Pinckney, and other community leaders brought this history into public view. Behind it, a transparent first floor opens the building to the street and to the community. Interior gathering spaces draw from the West African palaver tradition of communal dialogue and truth-telling.

From the beginning, the community was clear that Brooklyn Public Library had a dual responsibility — to honor the site's sacred past while also celebrating the neighborhood's vibrant present and future. Beginning in 2019, we undertook an extensive, multiyear community engagement process in partnership with Grain Collective, ARTs East New York, and Hester Street. Neighbors wanted a library that honors the burial ground and the history connected to it, and that also celebrates East New York as it exists today — with expanded gathering areas, cultural programming, learning spaces and technology access — and invests in the community's future generations. In the work of MASS Design Group, Marble Fairbanks, and Elizabeth Kennedy, these two responsibilities find expression together.

In addition to an extensive engagement process, BPL staff and the Team also visited other sites of cultural memory to learn about the research, design and engagement process of creating meaningful living memorials of our country's painful racial past.

The Library was also proud to work with community members to develop a set of procedures for respectfully responding to the possible discovery of human remains during construction — grounded in the same community-led process that shaped the Sankofa Park renovation, and reflecting the community's clear expectations for dignity, transparency, and ongoing consultation throughout the project.

Brooklyn Public Library is grateful to the many community members, advocates, cultural organizations, elected officials, and partners whose years of work have brought recognition to the East New York African Burial Ground. We are especially grateful for the public support that has made the New Lots Library project possible, including from Council Member Chris Banks, State Senator Roxanne J. Persaud, Brooklyn Borough President Antonio Reynoso, former Council Member Inez Barron, the New York State Council on the Arts, the New York State Education Department, proceeds from the redevelopment of Brooklyn Heights Library, and the participatory budget voters of the 42nd Council District.

Brooklyn Public Library is honored to share this work with the Committee today. We take seriously the responsibility of building on sacred ground, and we remain committed to approaching every aspect of this project with the care, transparency, and respect it deserves. I look forward to the day when East New York has a library worthy of its history and its future.

**Edwin Maxwell**

Chief Librarian, Brooklyn Public Library



**Testimony By:**

**Vito R. Pitta, Partner, Pitta & Baione LLP**

**To the New York City Council Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries and International Relations**

**Celebrating the Feast of San Gennaro and the Ferragosto Festival**

**May 13, 2026**

Good afternoon, Chair Williams and to the other members of the New York City Council Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries and International Relations. My name is Vito R. Pitta, and I am a Partner at Pitta & Baione LLP, and I appreciate the opportunity to present testimony to this committee today.

Pitta & Baione LLP is one of the nation's leading 9/11 firms founded by attorneys with very deep roots in Little Italy – indeed, my father, a firm partner, was born on Mulberry Street. We also have an equally deep commitment to fighting for New Yorkers who were lied to about the safety of the air in the aftermath of 9/11 and continue to suffer the consequences of living and working south of Houston Street and in Little Italy.

Well before programs like the September 11<sup>th</sup> Victim Compensation Fund and the World Trade Center Health program started, Pitta & Baione worked tirelessly in lobbying Congress to establish 9/11 benefits programs, and whenever that funding has been threatened, it has been our attorneys that have led the fight for the program's extension. Among our growing client base of over 10,000, are hundreds of individuals, residents and businesses in Little Italy.

Our attorneys' devotion and commitment to our neighbors in Little Italy is unparalleled and inspires and galvanizes our fight for residents, businesses, and the preservation of Little Italy's rich cultural traditions and customs.

It is also why we are so delighted and proud to demonstrate our very strong support of

Res 0082-2026, Celebrating the Feast of San Gennaro and the Ferragosta Festival. Pitta & Baione has long been supportive of the feast, the Figli di San Gennaro Board, and the Little Italy Merchants Association (LIMA).

It is particularly fitting to pay homage to the innumerable cultural, economic and political contributions of Italian Americans to New York City's singular character and ethos, on what will be San Gennaro's 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. It is also particularly heartrending that this celebration coincides with the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of 9/11- one of the very few years the Feast of San Gennaro's 100-year history was sadly interrupted.

The Feast of San Gennaro is an intensely significant celebration of Italian American faith, tradition, community and the indomitable resilience of the immigrant community. It is a festival that inspired a community in the dark days following 9/11 and it continues to inspire New York's soul, will and determination today.

We applaud and are immensely thankful for the City Council's resolution today celebrating a venerable institution in the Feast of San Gennaro. My thanks again for the opportunity to present testimony today.

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*Vito R. Pitta*  
*Partner*  
*Pitta & Baione LLP.*



**NYC Council Hearing 5.13.2026  
Testimony by Judith Insell,  
Executive Director: Bronx Arts Ensemble  
Regarding the Bronx Arts Ensemble/Van Cortlandt Park Alliance's  
6th Annual "Juneteenth Celebration, June 19, 2026 /  
Enslaved African Burial Ground Design Announcement**

Good afternoon, Chair Dr. Williams, and honorable members of the City Council. My name is Judith Insell, and I am the Executive Director of the Bronx Arts Ensemble.

On June 19th from 4-8pm, the Bronx Arts Ensemble & Van Cortlandt Park Alliance will present our 6th Annual collaborative Juneteenth event, honoring the Enslaved African Burial Ground located in Van Cortlandt Park, as well as all Enslaved African American people who helped build our great city. Together, our two Bronx cultural institutions have presented Juneteenth events since 2021, providing attendees with spiritually moving content and encouraging them to reflect on Juneteenth and the burial ground's historical significance.

With an estimated 1,000 people to attend this year's event, we have decided to expand to a full-fledged festival format, featuring multiple locations in the park with 4 hours of events planned, ranging from an African drumming, a libation ceremony, a New Orleans-style second line, and performances by the Bronx Arts Ensemble.

This year's celebration is significant. It will include the unveiling of design ideas for a reimagined Enslaved African Burial Ground. The general public will view the work of three Design Guide teams who are part of a collaborative of architects, designers, and community members who have spent the past 2 years developing ways to respectfully honor the Enslaved African legacy in the park. This reimagined design will memorialize the people who lived, worked, and ultimately died on the Bronx plantation that is now parkland.

Many New Yorkers have no idea that our city was built on the backs of enslaved Black and Indigenous people. At a time when our country is erasing painful history out of convenience and fear, our great city has the opportunity to elevate the history and contributions of Black Americans, instead of hiding from the truth.

Bronx Arts Ensemble and Van Cortlandt Park Alliance applaud the City Council's efforts to support a policy to broaden awareness of Juneteenth and honor the burial sites of enslaved African Americans in our city. We hope this is just the beginning of a wave of financial support to carry out this important work.

Thank you.

Judith Insell  
Executive Director  
Bronx Arts Ensemble

**New York City Council Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries and International  
Relations**

**Wednesday, May 13, 2026**

**Oversight – Commemorating Juneteenth and Honoring Burial Sites of Formerly  
Enslaved African Americans**

**Elana Ehrenberg, Design Trust for Public Space**

My name is Elana Ehrenberg, and I'm the Director of Strategic Partnerships at Design Trust for Public Space, a 31-year old non-profit dedicated to enlivening New York City's shared civic spaces to create a vibrant, inclusive, and sustainable city. I would like to thank Hon. Dr. Nantasha Williams, Chair, and the Committee Cultural Affairs, Libraries, and International Relations for holding this oversight hearing. I am grateful for the opportunity to submit testimony today.

African burial grounds, cemeteries, and sites of memory have experienced an elevated awareness in the past five-ten years, as important sites for remembrance and as potential spaces of community restoration and healing. These sites are joined by others, including Indigenous burial sites and settlements, as an emerging movement across New York City to preserve, protect, and memorialize Enslaved People burial grounds and sites of memory in our city's parks and public spaces. Community-led groups on Chrystie Street and Central Park in Manhattan, Flatbush and AME Church in Brooklyn, and Van Cortlandt Park and Hunts Point in the Bronx, among others, have explored new signage to tell forgotten stories, created temporary artistic memorials, and undertaken processes of collective healing through storytelling. Now is the time to capitalize on the clear need and interest in these sites.

For the past 18 months, The Reimagining the Enslaved African Burial Ground at Van Cortlandt Park project, led by Van Cortlandt Park Alliance, Design Trust for Public Space, and Liminal sp has been working to elevate public awareness of the largely unmarked Enslaved African Burial Ground in Van Cortlandt Park and to develop a community-informed vision for a future permanent memorial—one that connects Bronx residents and visitors to the site's history, acknowledges its painful legacy, and creates space for gathering, education, and healing.

One of the first steps in this process was the creation of a Legacy Council made up of local Bronx organizations, community members, descendants, stewards, students, and artists. This council has guided this design process by developing a set of values,

identifying goals that focus on honor and engagement, and range more specifically from spiritual depth to accessibility to aesthetics to education. In addition to the Legacy Council engagement, we hosted a series of events throughout this past summer and fall to raise more awareness of the site. The programming also created opportunities to survey the surrounding community, informing a Design Ideas Competition that aligns with the needs of the neighborhood and descendants.

The process itself has been a journey, and through this we have created a replicable model for other burial ground spaces, however there are barriers within city agencies that limit how descendants and community members can honor and mourn their enslaved ancestors. As grateful as we are for this conversation with the Committee, we would like to advocate for a joint hearing with other committees and city agencies on how to formalize a process of acknowledging these sites of memory in public spaces across the city. A few things Design Trust has identified that are needed:

**Better Processes:** Identifying and formalizing processes for how sites of memory are led by community driven organizations, benefit from shared expertise and design guidelines, have collaborative spaces across government and community, and can grow in accordance with their ambitions.

**Better Policies:** Creating permitting and approval policies that are more suited to the unique needs of memorial sites, including more flexible tools for temporary installations and clearer management responsibility in a city agency “home,” specific attention to ongoing conversations in the NYC Department of Parks Arts and Antiquities division about supporting community organizations

**Better Resources:** Creating a repository of shared tools, practices, guidelines, and assets, that can grow as local groups expand their ongoing work; kickstarting a ‘movement’ that can better attract private funders to provide joint giving and fundraising.

We are excited to invite you all to Van Cortlandt Park Alliance’s Juneteenth celebration where our three Design Guide teams will be sharing their design ideas for what a future Enslaved African Burial Ground memorial could look like in Van Cortlandt Park. Thank you for your time and consideration today. Design Trust looks forward to working with the members of this committee and city agencies, to ensure these burial grounds are places for deep reflection, meaningful education, collective healing, and vibrant cultural opportunities.

## ADVANCE | MORE OPERA

The Association for the Development of Vocal Artistry and Neighborhood Cultural Enrichment  
Manhattan Opera Repertory Ensemble  
Ansonia Station Box 231152, New York, NY 10023

### Testimony to the New York City Council

Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries, and International Intergroup Relations

Oversight – Commemorating Juneteenth and Honoring Burial Sites of Formerly  
Enslaved African Americans

T2026-1818

Submitted by

Cheryl Warfield

Professional Opera Singer, Teaching Artist, Producer and Founder of ADVANCE-  
MORE Opera

Wednesday, May 13, 2026

Good afternoon. Thank you, Deputy Speaker Williams, and committee members for hearing my testimony. And thank you City Council for your leadership regarding the FY 27 budget for arts and culture. We are grateful for your support for and belief in what we do.

I am Cheryl Warfield, a professional opera singer, and founder and artistic director of MORE Opera, a community based nonprofit vocal arts organization blazing a trail in culturally responsive musical programming and arts education in NYC. I testify today regarding Juneteenth, our country's most recent federal holiday. It is a truly American holiday and is for and should be treasured by all.

MORE Opera is a small budget nonprofit organization making a big impact in underserved and under-resourced communities in the Bronx, Manhattan and as of FY 2026 in Queens. We train members of the community, all ages, backgrounds, and levels of musical training to participate in community choruses singing with our professional company members.

Since 2022, we have celebrated Juneteenth through the presentation of free vocal concerts with an historical narrative, focusing on the music and the story behind Juneteenth. We draw parallels to colonialism and other forms of oppression to show how the themes of resilience and strength and the desire for freedom are universal.

All training and concerts are free and open to the general public. This year we will present seven Juneteenth concerts throughout 3 boroughs, at parks, plazas, and community centers, including a performance at Bella Abzug Park at Hudson Yards on June 16, June 19 at the Bronx Music Hall in the South Bronx, and outdoors in Sunnyside Queens in partnership with LaGuardia Performing Arts Center on June 21. These performances will focus on themes of liberty and freedom and will show correlations between Juneteenth and US independence in this historic year for our country.

Here are the confirmed concerts and locations:

June 2, 2:00 pm Vladeck Hall, 74 Van Cortlandt Park South, Bronx, NY 10463  
June 14, 2:00 pm St. Augustine's Church, 290 Henry Street, NYC 10002  
June 16, 4:30 pm Bela Abzug Park, West 34th Street and 10th Ave, Manhattan  
June 18, 1 pm National Council of Jewish Women, 241 West 72nd Street, NYC  
June 19, 2 pm - Bronx Music Hall, 438 East 163rd Street, Bronx, NY 10451  
June 21, 1 pm - Outdoors, Lowery Plaza, Sunnyside, Queens 11104  
July 2, 4 pm - LaGuardia Community College LIC Queens

A complete listing of dates and times for the performances can be found on our website at [www.moreopera.com](http://www.moreopera.com) and on the Louis Armstrong House Museum website.

It is heartening how so many arts and cultural leaders have united to amplify Juneteenth. In particular, Regina Bain of Louis Armstrong, Judith Insell, Bronx Arts Ensemble, Lucy Sexton with New Yorkers for Culture and Arts, and others from Culture at 3 have helped raise the visibility of the work of smaller organizations like MORE Opera so that we reach more New Yorkers and tell our stories.

It may be beneficial to the Juneteenth initiative for DCLA to earmark funding specifically for Juneteenth activities in the future. While we are a DCLA funding recipient, our grant is for other initiatives, and our Juneteenth activities are funded through other sources and in-kind.

On another note, MORE Opera supports the resolution regarding the San Gennaro Festival. MORE Opera has produced Opera Night annually since 2023 at the festival, and we look forward to participating in the 100th anniversary of this New York institution this coming September.

Thank you for this important hearing and for the opportunity to provide testimony.

Respectfully submitted,

/s/

Cheryl Warfield Singer, Educator, Producer and Founder,  
ADVANCE-MORE Opera

[www.moreopera.com](http://www.moreopera.com)

Juneteenth performance 6/17/2025 – Bella Abzug Park

<https://youtu.be/hI45yrHfFBE?feature=shared>

Written Testimony of Heather Quinlan  
Executive Director, Northeast Corridor Freedom Network  
In Support of Introduction 220-2026 “The Benjamin Prine Act”  
May 13, 2026

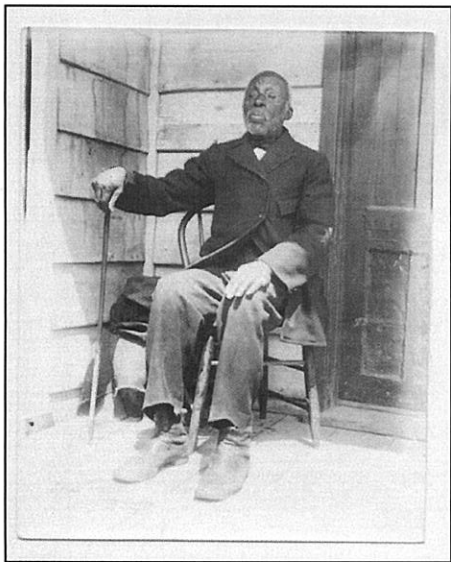
Good afternoon, Dr. Williams, Councilmember Hanks, and members of the Committee.

My name is Heather Quinlan. I am a filmmaker, historian, and Executive Director of the Northeast Corridor Freedom Network. For the past several years, I have researched the history of Cherry Lane Cemetery, a historic African-American burial ground on Staten Island, and I am here today to testify in strong support of Introduction 220, the Benjamin Prine Act.

This legislation is deeply important because burial grounds connected to formerly enslaved African Americans remain among the most vulnerable historic sites in New York City. Many are undocumented, poorly protected, or entirely erased from public memory.

Cherry Lane Cemetery is one such site.

Established in the 19th century and connected to Staten Island’s historic Black community, Cherry Lane served generations of African-American families, including formerly enslaved individuals and their descendants. Among those buried there was Benjamin Prine, born enslaved in New York in the late 1700s.



Benjamin Prine lived an extraordinary life. He built fortifications during the War of 1812, drove Staten Island’s first stagecoach, worked as a deckhand for Commodore Vanderbilt, and became well known throughout the borough. When he died in 1900 at over 100 years old, his obituary appeared in newspapers across the country, including *The New York Times*, *The Chicago Tribune*, and the *Iowa Gazette*. According to the *Elmira Star-Gazette*: “His stories of historical events were the talk of Staten Island..” Yet despite his prominence during his lifetime, Benjamin Prine was nearly erased from public memory within a generation.

He was buried at Cherry Lane Cemetery, which was later seized in 1954 for failure to pay taxes and eventually paved over for commercial development. Today, the location of Mr. Prine’s remains — as well as those of the estimated hundreds buried there, many of them babies and children — remains unknown.

Ward 1, Volume 4, District 6, Block No. 6, Map 4, Page 23.

Between Cherry Lane, Walnut Place and Linden Avenue.

Plot 14.

Owner or Occupant.	Description of Property.			Street No.	Ward, Lot or Map No.	Value of Real Estate Unimproved.	Value of Real Estate with Improvements Thereon.	
	Size of Lot.	Stories High.						
W. P. Williams.....	1152	x110	Irreg.	..	..	1	\$4,800	\$4,800
African Church Cemetery.....	133	x178	..	..	..	13	1,500	Exempt
Mary Prine.....	30	x175	..	..	..	19	300	300

1908 NYC Municipal Tax Rolls classifying Cherry Lane “African Church Cemetery” and “Exempt”

Research into Cherry Lane has revealed how vulnerable African-American burial grounds have historically been to bureaucratic neglect and legal loopholes. Cemetery records indicate that Cherry Lane had previously been recognized as tax exempt, yet through a 1954 court case that declared there was no cemetery, the board accumulated more than \$16,000 in back taxes — an impossible burden for a small community cemetery serving working-class Black Staten Islanders.

The result was catastrophic. Land that held generations of community history was ultimately treated as disposable real estate.

The Home Title Guaranty Company has searched the title to this property for the plaintiff and has certified as to the ownership of the same. This property is vacant, unimproved property and is believed to have at one time been used either for church or cemetery purposes, although there is no record of any persons actually having been buried there.

Judgment in 1954 court case which upheld the plaintiff’s claim that Cherry Lane was not a cemetery

Over the course of my research, I have also learned how fragmented African-American historical records often are. Census records, church records, death certificates, and family histories are frequently incomplete, inconsistent, or entirely missing due to the long legacy of enslavement, segregation, and displacement.

In many cases, burial grounds become one of the only surviving links between present-day families and their ancestors.

Benjamin Prine's descendants — who lived less than a mile from where he was buried — had never heard of him. This despite the fact that members of their own family once served on the cemetery board.

That is what erasure looks like.

And Cherry Lane is not an isolated case.

There are additional burial grounds throughout New York City that remain unmarked, undocumented, or vulnerable to destruction. Without proactive identification, preservation, and public education, more histories may disappear entirely.

The Benjamin Prine Act represents an important step toward correcting that historical failure. By requiring the identification and mapping of burial sites connected to formerly enslaved African Americans, developing educational initiatives, and creating coordination between agencies and experts, this legislation acknowledges that these sites are not only archaeological locations, but sacred community spaces tied to memory, ancestry, identity, and dignity.

This bill creates an opportunity not only to identify burial grounds, but to restore historical continuity to communities whose histories have too often been neglected or erased.

Thank you for your consideration and for recognizing the importance of this legislation.

Sincerely,

Heather Quinlan  
Executive Director  
Northeast Corridor Freedom Network  
[necorridorfreedomnetwork.org](http://necorridorfreedomnetwork.org)  
646-660-3008

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Executive Director  
Northeast Corridor Freedom Network  
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646-660-3008



**Vertices Incorporated**

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Brooklyn, NY 11215  
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917.696.3889

May 15, 2026

**Testimony pursuant to the May 13, 2026, public hearing of the City Council Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries and International Relations hearing**

I intended to deliver this testimony in person, but the day demanded my presence at an important Zoom meeting, requiring that I leave the hearing room before my panel could be called. Therefore, I humbly submit in writing as if spoken:

Thank you to Deputy Speaker and Chair Dr. Williams, members of the Committee and staff for this opportunity to lend my voice to the support of this Introduction.

As a member of the Anti-Racism Working Group, who along with another citizen testifying today, collaborated in the making of Juneteenth LinkNYC campaign through Louis Armstrong House and Museum that you heard referenced earlier in this hearing, I appear in support of the introduction relating to the memorialization of historical African American burial grounds. Members of our Working Group, and the First Amendment Culture Team (FACT), along with other arts leaders and workers from the Culture @ 3 community will, as we did last year, take part in the Juneteenth celebration hosted by Athenia Rodney/Juneteenth NY and NYC on June 20<sup>th</sup> in East New York. We welcome all New Yorkers to join us in our march from Gotham Health Center to Linden/Gershwin Park.

Now how could I not raise my voice in support when I just attended a presser on the steps of City Hall promoting the 20<sup>th</sup> annual NYC Dance Parade on Saturday an event in which I will , as of Saturday have taken part in for all 20? One Parade and festival has to support another, right?

As a cultural citizen, I found myself aghast when a procession last June 21, celebrating the grand opening of the satellite extension of the Caribbean Cultural Center African Diaspora Institute took us

to an alleyway near a gas station at the foot of the Triborough Bridge that marks the site of the historic Village of Harlem African Burial Ground. As a licensed NYC tour guide I felt ashamed of the way our city sometimes presents its face to itself, let alone the rest of the world's humanity that we, yes, still welcome here.

This introduction promises a beginning to a process of restoration of connection with the land once inhabited by the Lenape people and then worked by the enslaved and indentured people brought here to begin the transformation of these blessed lands into the theater of striving and struggle that continues to stand for who knows how long as the aspirational light of the world. The resurrection of these sacred sites will mark but a single step into a new dawn of recognition of whom we have been, uncovering the erasure of the full story that will enable us to step forward into the endlessly challenging era of the present.

My father drove my brother and I, at the ages of five and six respectively, up the Major Deegan to the old Yankee stadium to see our first, now legendary, professional sporting event. Before we ever glimpsed the impossibly green field on which people whose roots stretched back to all corners of the globe would play, I caught my first glimpse of the rock formation called Coogan's bluff and realized that I had spied something that existed before the first Europeans, the first enslaved Africans, and even the first Native Americans had arrived in what we now call New York City. That sight ignited within me a still vital question: "I see what they must have seen. How did it get to be like this?"

Adoption of this introduction will help other five and six year old New Yorkers and citizens of the world begin to answer for themselves the question that has so fascinated me.



**Testimony to the NYC Council Committee on Cultural Affairs,  
Libraries & International Relations**

Re: 0220-2026  
May 13, 2026

My name is Dr. Raymond Codrington and I am President and CEO of Weeksville Heritage Center. I am writing in support of 0220-2026. It is my strong belief that maintaining a list of all known burial sites of formerly enslaved African Americans citywide is a much needed step in documenting histories and populations that are erased from public memory. These sites should be memorialized and identified in order to provide the appropriate level of honor, care and respect for formerly enslaved African Americans.

Weeksville Heritage Center (WHC) is a historic site and cultural institution in Crown Heights/Central Brooklyn that uses education, arts, and a social justice lens to preserve, document and inspire engagement with the history of Weeksville, one of the largest free Black communities in pre-Civil War America, and the Historic Hunterfly Road Houses. Founded in 1838, historic Weeksville, was the second largest of approximately 100 independent African-American communities established before the Civil War.

I fully realize the implications of not recognizing the burial sites of formerly enslaved African Americans. In Weeksville, in 1851 three black men started Citizen's Union Cemetery. It was located on what is now Buffalo Avenue between Sterling Place and Eastern Parkway. While the cemetery was intended "to be a burial place for the colored" it accepted all races. Due to urban development, by 1880 the cemetery was demolished and bodies were either lost or re-interred to other cemeteries.

To our dismay, there are no physical markers of Citizen's Union Cemetery. In addition, there is limited information on this cemetery in the historical record. Lack of information on sites like this prevent New Yorkers from knowing the complete story of our city. We are denied the stories and history that literally exist under our feet and homes. Such knowledge would undoubtedly create new understandings of the experiences and contributions of formerly enslaved African Americans. Without this information, we are bound to know only incomplete histories informed by partial truths that leave out the narratives of some of the most historically marginalized New Yorkers. This bill attends to these omissions and restores a sense of respect and empathy to those who are considered ancestors.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Raymond Codrington', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Dr. Raymond Codrington  
President and CEO, Weeksville Heritage Center

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

in favor  in opposition

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Alton Murray

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

I represent: DCLA/admin

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. 220 Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

in favor  in opposition

Date: 5/13/26

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Dr. Aja LANS

Address: [REDACTED] CONDO NY

I represent: ~~Johns Hopkins~~

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. 220 Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

in favor  in opposition

Date: 5/13/26

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: HERBERT SEIGNOURET

Address: [REDACTED] Bklyn NY 11226

I represent: The City College of NY / IESV H

Address: 160 CONDUIT AVE, NY NY 10031

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. 220 Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

in favor  in opposition

Date: 5/13/26

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Dr. Matthew Reilly

Address: Brooklyn, NY 11231

I represent: The City College of New York

Address: 160 Convent Ave New York NY 10031

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. 220 Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

in favor  in opposition

Date: 5/13/26

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Dr. Elizabeth D. Meade

Address: NY NY 10016

I represent: Professional Archaeologists of NYC

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

in favor  in opposition

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Dr. McDonald

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

I represent: myself

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

in favor  in opposition

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Judith Insell

Address: [REDACTED] NY, NY 10031

I represent: Bronx Arts Ensemble

Address: 80 Van Cortlandt Park South #7M3 Bronx, NY 10463

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

in favor  in opposition

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Samantha Bernardino

Address: 648 Prospect Place

I represent: The Flatbush African Burial Ground

Address: Coalition

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. 220 Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

in favor  in opposition

Date: 3/13/26

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Heather Quintan

Address: PO Box 257 Mt Taber, NJ 07872

I represent: NE Corridor Freedom Network

Address: Same