

## Harlem's African Burying Ground and New Haarlem (Harlem)

*Supporting the Elmendorf Reformed Church*

By Christopher Paul Moore 1/27/2009

Founded in 1660 as the First Reformed Dutch Church of New Haarlem, the church is today known as the Elmendorf Reformed Church, and it is seeking to preserve and protect the full parameter of its historic African Burying Ground.

Attention to the cemetery has come about because of plans by the New York City Department of Transportation (DOT) to replace the Willis Avenue Bridge. The church's concern regarding DOT construction plans are two-fold: First, that the historic cemetery not be invaded; and second, that DOT design plans for the new bridge be reviewed to determine how it will impact upon the cemetery and emerging plans to commemorate both the cemetery, and the surrounding, and founding, Village of New Haarlem.

There is an amazing historic footprint beneath the blocks and streets adjacent to the African cemetery, which is today partly covered by the 126th Street Bus Depot. In the neighborhood of the cemetery was Haarlem's first church, an inn, a mill, homes, farms, ferry landing, an Indian trail, and the "Road to New Haarlem," a ten-mile road from lower Manhattan, constructed in 1658 by enslaved African workers. These workers were, in effect, our city's first DOT employees, and more probably, the city's first Department of Transportation – in its entirety. Some of these workers and their families may well lie in the cemetery.



DOT construction design, upon and around the Willis Avenue Bridge, will be critical to future commemoration. The current project has had no concern for a public space to memorialize the cemetery or to celebrate historic Harlem, which is currently in its 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary year. Ramps and roadways, now being planned by DOT, may obliterate any opportunity for the development of a first class public space or cultural amenity in 2014, when the MTA plans to raze or alter the bus depot. Design alterations made now could make for both a great new public space and a great new bridge.

The Elmendorf Church is demonstrating that there is a need to preserve, protect, and honor its historic burial ground, as well as the historic village of Harlem. I believe there is truly the possibility of a real historic and cultural bonanza in this project, and coordination between DOT, MTA, NYCEDC (New York City Economic Development Corporation) and park designers will be both crucial and beneficial to the ultimate plans for both the new bridge and the 125<sup>th</sup> Street neighborhood. A thoughtfully designed park, promenade or plaza could become the new "first stop" for visitors to Harlem, and a bonus for 125<sup>th</sup> Street, and all of NYC.

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