Feet in 2 Worlds
Fighting for the Future of Flatbush's African Burial Ground

The largest known colonial burial ground for people of African descent in the United States — both free and enslaved — is in New York City. That burial ground in Lower Manhattan is a national park and monument that commemorates the forgotten and brutal history of slavery in New York City. But it's far from the only site of this complex past.

Producer Leina Gabra takes us to Flatbush, Brooklyn in New York, where a group of community activists are uncovering the history that laid below a corner of *their* neighborhood.

Quincy Surasmith: This is Feet in 2 Worlds, telling the stories of today's immigrants. I'm Quincy Surasmith, Managing Editor.

When you think of monuments that mark the United States' history of slavery, you might think of Civil War memorials, or of plantations still standing in the South. But the largest known colonial burial ground for people of African descent—both free and enslaved—is actually in New York City.

That burial ground is a national park and monument that commemorates the forgotten and brutal history of slavery in New York City. But it's far from the only site of this complex past. In 2020, a group of community activists in Flatbush, Brooklyn uncovered the history that laid below a corner of *their* neighborhood.

Feet in 2 Worlds producer Leina Gabra has the story.

Leina Gabra: It's a Saturday afternoon in August, and I'm standing on the corner of Bedford Avenue and Church Avenue in Brooklyn, New York with a broom in my hand.

Leina: Oh my God, so much broken glass in here.

Leina: On first glance, it just looks like an average busy corner—there's two bus stops, a gas station, and a bodega. But in front of me, behind a chain-link fence, is a lot covered in overgrown green grass. It's about 2000 square feet, and it takes up most of the northeastern side of the corner.

I'm here with Samantha Bernardine. Samantha's been organizing a community clean up effort on this corner for years.

Samantha Bernardine: The space became a dumping ground for people who are in construction. You'll see toilet bowls, you'll see sinks, you'll see debris.

Leina: Today, thankfully there aren't any toilet bowls or sinks to remove, but it's definitely not *clean*. You'd think that Samantha would be frustrated that garbage keeps getting dumped here, but if she is, she doesn't show it.

Samantha: What I decided to do was to create artwork so that as people are passing by, they take a moment before they dump anything here.

Leina: Samantha's preparing the sidewalk for a new art piece. While I sweep, she pulls paint cans out of the trunk of her car. The car radio's blasting along.

She pours a can of light yellow paint on the sidewalk.

Samantha: I'll do this so that it can go into those crevices that normally the roller can't go into.

Leina: There used to be a mural here, but it's faded now. Samantha uses a paint roller to spread the paint along the sidewalk, covering the old design to make a brand new, clean yellow slate.

Samantha: We are painting over our boardwalk mural that signifies that this area is a burial ground.

Leina: That's right—the unassuming patch of grass in front of us is called the Flatbush African Burial Ground. The cleanups are organized by the Flatbush African Burial Ground Coalition. We'll call them the Coalition. Samantha Bernardine is their president.

The Coalition is made up of different activists, groups, and community members. In their words, they're "fighting to preserve the [grounds] from further desecration."

25 years ago, this corner looked very different than it does today—there was an abandoned school that the New York City Board of Education was considering reopening. In 2001, the board had an archaeological firm assess the lot, and it made a gut-wrenching discovery: four human teeth and a mandible.

These findings were included in a 2001 report to the city: Clear evidence of a burial ground. We'll come back to that report later in the story. In 2020, the city tried to build over it. The people who had lived in or near Flatbush their whole life, like Samantha, didn't know it was a burial ground *until* then.

Right now, the Flatbush African Burial Ground is a fenced off lot no larger than 3000 square feet. But the burial ground extends beyond the lot—underneath the gas station

and the school, further down the block. It was used as a burial site for free and enslaved Black people in Flatbush possibly since as early as the 1600s. But, for centuries, the local government and the colonists who settled Flatbush disregarded and disrespected the space.

Samantha and the Coalition believe that the people of Flatbush—especially its Black community—should decide how best to memorialize the burial ground. But the site remains a neglected patch of grass. And today, Flatbush residents are still in the dark about the government's plans.

> Samantha: Community members have not been brought to the table and ask: hey, what would you like in your community?

Leina: I couldn't survey the whole community, but I got in touch with one Flatbush resident who grew up on the same block the site sits on.

> Corazón Valiente: Our roots are going deep, and a lot of us aren't going anywhere.

Leina: That's Corazón Valiente. I met up with him at the Flatbush Public Library, where he'd been coming all his life. He says that he wants the burial ground's memorial to be...

> Corazón: Something that feels really culturally relevant. What, what did they do in, like, the Dogon tribe? How do they do their burial spaces? What does that look like? That would be cool if we could do that here.

Leina: Corazón is referring to the Dogon people of West Africa. He wants the space to pay tribute to the peoples of this region, where many of those enslaved in the U.S. originally were from. But he also wants the space to serve the community in Flatbush today. In his imagination, he sees trees and bushes sprouting up from the ground:

> Corazón: You know, include some type of foliage so it's not concrete. And then also something for kids. That's really what I'd like, to see the kids make that connection early.

Leina: And there are a lot of kids around. The site is in a busy urban area right next to a school. Corazón wants the space to address the block's needs, *specifically*. Even though this is just one person's opinion, it's a concrete idea. And that's something that the city—and specifically, the Parks Department—has not considered in its own plans.

For Corazón and Samantha—who are both Black, along with many longtime Flatbush residents—it's crucial that the burial ground is stewarded with care. They want it to honor the neighborhood's Black community, of both the past and the present.

But Samantha doesn't have too much faith in Parks.

Two days after the cleanup, I visited Samantha at work to talk about the city's role in the site. She's a teacher at the Erasmus School, a block away from the burial ground.

Samantha's school building is imposing and grand, with ornate turrets and windows that make it look more like a massive church than a high school. I called her from the front gates.

Samantha: Hello, good afternoon.

Leina: Hi, this is Leina. I'm in front of the building.

Samantha: Hi. Okay, coming down.

Leina: Hi, how are you? Good, good to see you.

Leina: As she walks me through the campus up to her classroom, we pass groups of students practicing a drum routine:

[Sound of drums]

Samantha: Great job, great job!

Kids: Thank you!

Leina: Samantha tells me that the way that she found out about the burial ground felt like a slap in the face.

She *first* became interested in the empty lot next door in 2020, when she was asked to represent the school at a community meeting organized by the mayor's office.

City representatives presented their plans for the lot: they wanted to build housing on it. Even back then, Samantha didn't really get why the city would choose to build housing in *this* spot.

Samantha was hoping for a *public space* for the community, and not just another building.

Samantha: It made sense for it to be a park or something, but wanted to be open-minded to the plan.

Leina: After all, at the time she had no clue about the lot's history and was happy to be involved. Like most city government meetings, it was stuffy and procedural—

Samantha: ...until the representatives from the Historical Society brought up the fact that it was known as a African burial ground. And we all kind of paused and was like, come again, could you explain that? What do you, what do you mean?

Leina: Samantha was shocked. Other folks from the neighborhood were, too. How could they NOT have known about this?

Samantha: I made a decision from there that…I would definitely make sure that nothing is built here without the community being aware of that.

[Archival sound from Jouvert 2025]

Leina: At the end of August, right about when Samantha was repainting around the burial ground, Brookyn celebrated *J'ouvert* and Carnival. Every year, the community organizes a huge street parade, celebrating the diaspora of the many cultures and nations of the Caribbean, a region also known as the West Indies. Outside of the actual Caribbean, Brooklyn has the largest West Indian population in the world.

Flatbush is the hub of the city's Caribbean culture. Both Samantha and Corazón have Guyanese ancestry, and are proud of it. When I asked Corazón about how his ancestry manifests in his life, he told me that honoring it was just a part of his upbringing:

Corazón: It was just like something that we did because it was always taught to us to be important to honor who came before us and also to remember what they had to go through.

Leina: Both he and Samantha were born and raised in Brooklyn. But they were also raised by immigrants from the Caribbean who molded this neighborhood into what it is today. Samantha's family made sure she stayed connected to their homeland:

Samantha: I wasn't born in Grenada, but I was raised as a Grenadian.

Leina: But her life experience and memories are also tied to what it was like growing up in Brooklyn as a Black woman. So, even though Samantha's direct family doesn't descend from anyone that was interred at the Flatbush African Burial Ground, she feels that her connection to them—as a Black Caribbean, and a Black American—is inextricable. The pain Samantha felt when she found out about the cemetery was personal.

Samantha: How could you build on top of a known burial ground? Especially a burial ground of Blacks: of us, *of me,* of my descendants.

Leina: The painful truth is, this lot in Flatbush has been built over many times. Knowledge about it being a burial ground only became widespread thanks to the Coalition's activism a few years ago. But records of this burial ground have existed for centuries. They tell us a lot about how this space was disrespected over the years.

Let's start with what it looks like now: an empty lot completely covered with tall grass. That's probably similar to what it looked like in the 18th century, when the land in Flatbush was owned by Dutch settlers.

Nearly all of these landowners used the labor of enslaved Black people to turn Flatbush into an agricultural town that sold its crops to the city of Manhattan. Even in death, Flatbush was segregated: white people were buried in the church cemetery a few hundred feet away where Black people—both enslaved and free—were *not* allowed.

But the site hasn't been empty for all these years. It actually has only been that way since 2015. To find out more about how it looked before then, I asked Corazón.

Corazón: It was, for as long as I could remember, like a boarded up red brick building with a bunch of scaffolding around. You know, I was certain that there was like ghosts in the windows, 'cause it was like old curt—like they didn't even clean it out. And then one day they just tore it all down.

Leina: The school building that Corazón remembers was first built in 1878. At that time, it was already known that the area was a burial ground. That's right—people have known for more than 150 years. The Coalition and its allies have done meticulous archival research that shows this, over and over. They found an 1855 map of Flatbush that depicts the "Negro Burying Ground" in this exact spot. But the government built the school on top of it anyway.

One source claims that remains were removed and reinterred before construction began, but clearly this wasn't true—remember, archeologists found remains there in 2001. And that wasn't the first time remains had been found there; it was the *third*.

The Coalition also found a *Brooklyn Citizen* article from 1890, which reported that two skeletons were excavated while building a new sewer for the school. Again, the building over continued.

Then, almost 15 years later in 1904, several local newspapers reported that construction workers had once again found human remains: an intact skeleton. Just as workers removed the bones from the ground and laid them out onto the street, the school day let out, and students came flooding outside.

A group of schoolboys ran to grab the bones, laughing. They "paraded" around the area with the bones, carrying them like muskets. When they got bored, they demolished the skeleton. According to the *Brooklyn Eagle*, they "smashed the skull to pieces." They took teeth with them, and left the rest of the bone fragments in the street.

In 2020, the city proposed to build new housing over the ground. They did this while knowing—maybe even for centuries—that this had been a burial ground. For the Coalition, this was unacceptable.

Samantha: It was really sneaky to say the least.

Leina: Samantha decided to speak out.

Samantha: So I would get, plastic tablecloths and write out letters that says, “Hands off our land, did you know that this is an African burial ground?” And each week I was at the site putting up stuff, informing people that, hey, this is an African burial ground, were you aware of that? And people was like, are you kidding me?

Leina: When Corazón found out, he joined to help in any way that he could.

Corazón: It was I guess my first time ever organizing. It felt pretty new to me.

Leina: Corazon told me that they went down every path to raise awareness: they had writers publishing stories about the burial ground, marches down Church Avenue…

Corazón: Then also we went down to Borough Hall too, and rallied around there. So like, we were serious.

Leina: Here’s Samantha in October 2021 outside the office of the Brooklyn Borough President and Brooklyn’s oldest public building. She’s in front of a group of peaceful protesters…megaphone in hand.

Samantha: …To tell us that we do not support low income people, but if you bid in the Flatbush area, you will see all the housing being built. There are shelters that are packed with families…

Leina: In under a year, this community activism was able to put a stop to the city’s housing proposal. This was a huge win for Samantha and the Coalition. They thought that this was a sign that the city was listening to them, and valued their input.

Samantha and the Coalition worked hard to engage the community in how best to remember the people buried in their neighborhood. First, they turned to the archives at the Brooklyn Public Library.

The Coalition found an 1810 obituary published in the *Long Island Star* for a woman named Eve. That obituary said that she had died in Flatbush after living there for over 100 years. Records from the time show that Eve was enslaved by Lawrence Voorhees.

According to the clipping, Eve’s burial was “attended by a great concourse of the people of colour” at the “African burying ground of the village of Flatbush.” It also mentioned that Eve loved to garden, and that she tended to her plants every summer right until her death. So, some community members thought…

Samantha: Well, let's turn it into a garden. In the beginning of our work, we called the site “Eve's Garden.”

Leina: Community members envisioned the lot as a community garden where they could grow fresh produce. They were inspired by that small glimpse of who Eve was. The farms of Flatbush back then mostly grew grains and barley, but maybe Eve’s garden was full of herbs or medicinal plants. Or maybe Eve liked to plant flowers. But the

more that the Coalition dug into the lot's past, a painful truth was uncovered. Samantha remembers:

> Samantha: The last time that remains were removed from the site, I believe it was in 2001, it was three teeth and part of a jaw.

Leina: Remember that archeological report the city ordered when it was thinking about reopening the abandoned schoolbuilding? That's what Samantha is referring to. It was *far* from the first time that remains had been found here. Samantha told me that these archaeologists had studied the remains to identify the likely age and cause of death of the individuals they belonged to. They determined that some of these teeth had come from a girl probably in her late teens, and that they had passed away due to malnutrition.

> Samantha: Then community members was like, well, how does it feel creating a garden from a site of descendants who died from malnutrition? It's like you're pulling, again, taking from the land and not giving to the land.

Leina: She means that some people felt it was wrong to grow and harvest food for their community on the burial ground, knowing that those children might have died from a lack of food. That, in a figurative sense, taking food out of that land felt like taking food away from those children.

In 2023, after the Coalition stopped the housing plan, the money and the project—about $4 million—was transferred to the Parks Department.

> Samantha: That was done without our knowledge.

Leina: Since then, local politicians and elected officials have stalled or outright ignored their requests to be involved in the burial ground's future.

> Samantha: So our city councilman at the time—um, it started off pleasant and then it became a little…disgruntled. Where he started to question us. So he was in support of us, and then all of a sudden it turned into something else.
>
> Our current city councilmember, Rita Joseph, we have tried multiple times to have true dialogue with her. Those have been great and sometimes it's been silence.

Leina: I reached out to Rita Joseph's office for comment, but never heard back.

Most recently, the Coalition heard from another source that the Parks Department had allegedly reached out to architectural companies in the area for budget proposals for the Flatbush burial ground. That same source says that Parks has already awarded the contract to an architectural firm—all without consulting the community at all.

When asked about this, the Parks Department denied that a contract had been awarded to anyone for this development.

Samantha: We have sacrificed our family, we've sacrificed personal events in order for us to make sure that this does not get done behind people's backs and in a disrespectful way.

If we were in a white community, that conversation would've been had before anybody is brought to the table as a potential developer, as a potential construction firm, any of that. But when it comes down to minority communities, we're told what we need and never asked what we want.

Leina: Since communication with the city has dropped off in recent years, the Coalition has taken matters into their own hands. They've done this through the group cleanups. But in fall 2024, they took a bigger step: they conducted a ground penetration radar survey, or GPR.

I reached out to Dr. Kelly Britt, an urban archaeologist at Brooklyn College who has been supporting the Coalition for years. Unlike the Coalition members, she isn't a Flatbush resident and she is white. But she has dedicated a lot of her research to changing the way archaeology practices treat and respect Black and indigenous burial grounds. I asked Dr. Britt: how does GPR work?

Kelly Britt: It's like taking an x-ray of the ground. The only thing with GPR is, all that it does is tell you that there's an anomaly, right, that there's something there. It's not gonna tell you, there's a grave there.

Leina: I also asked her: why did the Coalition decide to do the GPR in fall 2024?

Kelly: The reason why we did the GPR wasn't just to see if we could find additional information of what was below. But it was to give the community a voice in how this site is researched, how it's memorialized, how it's just incorporated into, you know, the community hasn't had a whole lot of say.

Leina: By fall 2024, the Coalition, its allies, and Flatbush community members were tired of waiting around for the city. In their view, the GPR was a way of collecting their *own* information about the land without disturbing it.

The survey was done by geophysical archaeologist Dr. Tim Horsely, who specializes in doing GPR analyses of cemeteries and burial grounds.

Tim Horsely: You'll see some data today and you'll hopefully see some of the complexity of it, and I'll try and talk you through what it means.

Leina: He presented his findings on a Zoom call in late August. There were eleven of us on the call. In her little box on the screen, Samantha closed her eyes, and asked us all to take a moment of gratitude.

Samantha: Just take a deep breath in. [Breathes in.] And let it out. [Breathes out.] We give honor to this space and we acknowledge those who have paved the

way for us, and especially those indigenous people who are the original stewards of this land.

Leina: Dr. Horsley went on to give a meticulously detailed presentation of his work, showing diagrams and maps of all kinds. But, in the end, he concluded:

Tim: I highlighted any reflection that I saw and none of them had the characteristics or the shape of the extent that made me confident that there was anything that looked like a burial.

Leina: Despite Dr. Horsley's best attempt to manage expectations, I was disappointed. Still, he was adamant that the GPR results weren't telling the whole story about what this place was. The archives still showed that it was a burial ground. But, he cautioned, his report had the potential to be misunderstood.

Tim: It could be very easy for someone to come along and say, "Well, yeah, Horsley didn't detect anything, his report shows there's nothing there, we can now build an apartment block or, you know, we can do whatever here." No...We have enough other evidence, right? That there is a burial ground.

Samantha: Even though the report leads to additional questions...we really truly thank you for that. And it also feeds us with what our next steps are...

Leina: Samantha and the Coalition are not abandoning the fight. They can't—it means too much to her, and to her community.

Samantha: We haven't found anything on our site. But just the thought of it, you know, that these were humans and again, for the city to build on top of us... The city needs to stand up and say, you know what? We have done a wrong.

Leina: The Flatbush burial ground is actually one of several African Burial Grounds throughout New York City. But only the one in Lower Manhattan is a true memorial. It also became a national monument, part of the National Park Service in 2006. It's just a few miles away from the Flatbush one, but it looks *very* different. It has a huge stone monument, surrounded by well-manicured grass and a visitor center off to the side.

I felt disheartened that the Flatbush site was in this state of limbo—a vacant lot. While in Manhattan, they clearly had the resources and attention for a much larger memorial. I asked Dr. Britt why this was.

Kelly: Protests. The Lower Manhattan African Burial Ground would not have existed if it wasn't for the general public.

Protesters (Archival): We are an African people! We are an African people! We are...

Kelly: They fought for it, and they fought strong and hard, and that's how they saved it, and that's how it became the landmark that it is and was able to be designated the way that it is.

Protesters (Archival): We are an African people! We are an African people! We are…

Leina: The establishment of the Lower Manhattan Burial Ground was a landmark for how grassroots movements can save history, and make sure that it isn't forgotten.

Our current presidential administration has become *hellbent* on doing the opposite. It's attacking institutions like the Smithsonian from all angles, all to insist that the museum focused too much on "how bad slavery was," in the president's words on Truth Social.

While these attacks can't ever change history, they do have the potential to change our public *memory*—and what is history if not a story that everyone agrees on?

While the federal administration attempts to rewrite and erase Black history nationally, it's critical that we also pay attention to what's happening in our communities at the local level. In Flatbush, a physical piece of Black history hangs in the balance.

What is the value of honoring a space like this one? And, in this new political reality, what is the value of a Black community honoring its history in its *own* way?

It's a common saying that history is written by the victors, but maybe history is written by those who refuse to let their stories be lost.

Quincy: This story was produced for Feet in 2 Worlds by Leina Gabra. To read more about the Flatbush African Burial Ground, you can visit our site at Fi2W.org. That's F I the number 2, W, dot org.

This story was edited by Mia Warren and Quincy Surasmith. Sound design and scoring by Ahmed Ashour. Our managing director is Mia Warren. Our managing editor is Quincy Surasmith. Our development coordinator is Alejandro Salazar Dyer. Leina Gabra is our intern. Jocelyn Gonzalez is our technical director and engineer. Fact-check by Julie Schwietert Collazo. Feet in 2 Worlds' original theme music is by Gautam Srikishan.

Visit our website at Fi2W.org to listen to more stories of today's immigrants. I'm Quincy Surasmith. Thank you for listening.

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