

# CONSECRATION OF THE ENSLAVED AFRICAN BURIAL GROUND

VAN CORTLANDT PARK

JUNETEENTH  
SATURDAY, JUNE 19, 2021 • 11 AM



This momentous event is presented respectfully by  
The Enslaved People Project Steering Committee  
Van Cortlandt Park Alliance  
Van Cortlandt House Museum  
Kingsbridge Historical Society  
In cooperation with NYC Parks.

In gratitude for the sacrifice of the African Ancestors  
who built what is now Van Cortlandt Park.

*The Juneteenth Flag was created by activist and organizer Ben Haith, also known as Boston Ben, who founded the National Juneteenth Celebration Foundation (NJCF). Ben Haith created the flag in 1997 in collaboration with Verlene Hines, Azim, and Eliot Des. Three years later, artist Lisa Jeanne Graf "fine tuned" the original version, resulting in the flag we see today. In 2007, the date of the first Juneteenth (June 19, 1865) was added to the flag.*

- **Arc:** A new horizon, meaning fresh opportunities and promising futures for Black Americans;
- **Star:** Not only is it a nod to the Lone Star State (where Juneteenth was first celebrated in 1865), but it also stands for the freedom of every Black American in all 50 states;
- **Burst:** The outline surrounding the star is meant to reflect a nova— or new star—which represents a new beginning for all;
- **Red, White, and Blue:** Using the colors of the US flag shows that formerly enslaved Blacks and their descendants are free Americans, too.

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## PROGRAM

**West African Drumming:** Yahaya Kamate and Mousse Drame

**Call to Order:** Stephanie Ehrlich, Enslaved People Project Steering Committee

**Opening Remarks:** Peggy King Jorde, Cultural Projects Consultant

**Van Cortlandt Park Alliance:** Olga Luz Tirado, Board Member

**Unveiling of New Signage, NYC Parks:** Liam Kavanagh, First Deputy Commissioner; Iris Rodriguez-Rosa, Bronx Borough Commissioner; Crystal Howard, Assistant Commissioner for Communications

**Negro Spiritual:** *Lift Every Voice*, Beverly Fleming-Camejo, Soloist

**Libation Ceremony:** Chief Baba Neil Clarke; accompanied by Khuent Rose, steelpan

**Wreath Placement:** Congressman Bowman

*The Memorial Wreath, composed by Laura Carpenter Myers, combines herbs and plant materials to represent healing, justice, peace, and remembrance.*

**Elected Officials:** Congressman Jamaal Bowman; Congressman Adriano Espaillat; NYS Assemblyman Jeffrey Dinowitz; NYC Councilman Eric Dinowitz; NYC Councilman Ydanis Rodriguez; NYS Senator Alessandra Biaggi

**Music Presented by Bronx Arts Ensemble**

Executive Director, Judith Insell, viola, *I Want Jesus to Walk With Me* (Negro Spiritual)

Teaching Artists: Ashley Hart Adams reads *Freedom Fighter*, by Carole Boston

Weatherford, accompanied by Kika Wright, bassoon, *Deep River* (Negro Spiritual)

**Stealing Joy:** Kamau Ware, Artist & Historian, Black Gotham Experience

**Negro Spiritual:** *Ain't That Good News*, Beverly Fleming-Camejo, Soloist

**Benediction:** Rev. Dr. Hermon L. Darden, Senior Pastor, St. Stephen's United Methodist Church

**West African Drumming:** Yahaya Kamate and Mousse Drame

Livestream available at [facebook.com/vcpalliance/live](https://www.facebook.com/vcpalliance/live)  
Recording will be available at [vancortlandt.org](https://www.vancortlandt.org)

## Dear Friends:

In 2020, set against the backdrop of a national reckoning on racial injustice and a global pandemic, local community members **DePrator** and **Jacki Fischer** lobbied to close a path in the park to pedestrian and vehicular traffic. That path is the Enslaved African Burial Ground we consecrate today. While many have long felt in their bones this was sacred space, Jacki and DePrator's passion and determination led the way to ensure this formal acknowledgement. While today's ceremony is indeed a momentous occasion, the consecration of the Enslaved African Burial Ground was a long time coming.

In 2018, **Nick Dembowski**, Kingsbridge Historical Society President, presented **Margot Perron**, then the Administrator at Van Cortlandt Park, with historical documents indicating the rough location of a burial ground for enslaved Africans and a proposal for marking the site. She assembled a team of committed community members including **Michele March**, and experts like **Sherrill Wilson**, and renowned Cultural Projects Consultant **Peggy King Jorde** for guidance.

In 2019, Perron coordinated the implementation of a USDA ground-penetrating radar study that detected soil disturbances below ground consistent with human burials. The Enslaved Africans Project was born (later renamed "Enslaved People Project" to include Africans, their descendants, and Indigenous people who were enslaved on this land).

In 2020, **Community Board 8** underwrote the creation of a curriculum to bring to light the history of enslaved people in the park. **Christina Taylor** has shepherded the group with determination and attention to detail. **Leslie Lannon** has been a key advocate on the project's behalf, securing funding from NYC Department of Cultural Affairs.

Also in 2020, Van Cortlandt House Museum, under the direction of **Laura Carpenter Myers**, opened the slave quarters to public viewing. The museum operates under the auspices of The National Society of Colonial Dames of the State of New York and The Historic House Trust of New York City. Laura and Nick continue to be our hyper-local history experts—with deep knowledge of the house, the Van Cortlandt family, and the area now known as the park.

In January 2021, **Bronx Borough Commissioner Iris Rodriguez-Rosa** and I responded swiftly to the request to close the path. The NYC Parks team and Van Cortlandt Park Alliance implemented the closure. Shout out to **John-Paul Catusco** and **John Butler** for closing the path with the help of VCPA staff and volunteers.

This is just the beginning! There is much more work to be done. Look for programming, interpretation, tours, and more related to the Enslaved African Legacy in Van Cortlandt Park.

**If you would like to get involved or support this project, please contact [info@vancortlandt.org](mailto:info@vancortlandt.org).**

With deep appreciation and gratitude,  
Stephanie Ehrlich  
Executive Director, Van Cortlandt Park Alliance & Park Administrator, NYC Parks

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Peggy King Jorde  
Rev. Dr. Hermon L. Darden  
Kamau Ware  
Sherrill Wilson  
NYC Department of Cultural Affairs  
Andrew Cohen, NYC Council Member (former)  
Cheyney McKnight, Not Your Momma's History  
NY Historical Society

### Enslaved People Project

#### Steering Committee

Nick Dembowski  
DePrator  
Stephanie Ehrlich  
Jacki Fischer  
Laura Carpenter Myers  
Christina Taylor

#### Task Force

#### Michele March, Founding Member

Deborah Abel, NYC Underground Railroad  
Miriam Allen, Christ Church Riverdale  
Adam Arenson, Manhattan College  
Bob Bender, Community Board 8  
Nilka Martel, Loving the Bronx  
Mark D. Naison, Fordham University  
Jennifer Sanchez, ABADA Capoeira Studio  
Roberta Todd, Christ Church Riverdale

#### NYC Parks

Commissioner Mitchell J. Silver, FAICP  
Commissioner Iris Rodriguez-Rosa  
Deputy Commissioner Mark A. Focht, PLA FASLA  
Assistant Commissioner Crystal Howard  
Karina Smith  
Margot Perron  
Van Cortlandt Park Staff

#### Van Cortlandt Park Alliance

Nina Habib Spencer, Board Co-chair  
Carol Samol, Board Co-chair  
Olga Luz Tirado, Board Member  
Gary Axelbank, Board Member  
Board of Directors and Staff

## Hester & Piero

### And Hundreds Whose Names We Do Not Know

Also in 2019, noted artist and historian **Kamau Ware** of Black Gotham Experience created an original photographic essay, *Sugar Shadow*, honoring the lives, the sacrifice, and the humanity of enslaved Africans **Hester and Piero**, whose names are recorded as having lived and worked on the land that is now the park. Piero was a respected miller; his wife Hester was a domestic servant. We have learned the names of just a few of the Enslaved people who lived, worked, and died on the land that is now Van Cortlandt Park. Much of the information is due to the work of Nick Dembowski, President of the Kingsbridge Historical Society, who has studied wills and multitudes of documents to put together a cohesive narrative, available on the **Kingsbridge Historical Society website: [kingsbridgehistoricalsociety.org](http://kingsbridgehistoricalsociety.org)** See: "Black Kingsbridge" and "Kingsbridge Burial Ground" articles.

Kamau Ware's work, *Stealing Joy*, has been rendered as a flag to fly at Van Cortlandt House Museum, marking the place where enslaved people lived on the uppermost floor; it is on view outside the museum through October. **Van Cortlandt House Museum and the Enslaved People's Quarters are open to the public for self-guided tours by reservation: [vchm.org](http://vchm.org)**

#### Enslaved Africans and Descendants\*

Piero the Miller, his wife Hester, and their son Pieter  
Andrew Saxton the Cooper  
Levellie the Boatman  
Cesar and his wife Kate  
Mary, Hester, Claus, Franke, Dinah, Robin

#### Enslaved Indigenous People\*

Pompey, Cesar

\*Names researched by Nick Dembowski

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**The New York and Northern Railroad Company have purchased a gravel bed covering an area of about seven acres, constituting a portion of the Van Cortlandt estate, near Mosholu or South Yonkers. In digging for gravel, human bones were found. These are supposed to be remains of slaves once owned by the Van Cortlandt family. Caleb Van Tassel, of Yonkers, now eighty-four years old, about fifty years ago made a coffin for a slave who was buried near the Van Cortlandt mansion.**

~ Portchester Journal, September 22, 1879

## Lift Every Voice

James Weldon Johnson, Lyrics

John Rosamond Johnson, Music

Lift every voice and sing  
Till earth and heaven ring  
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty  
Let our rejoicing rise  
High as the listening skies  
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea  
Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us  
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us  
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun  
Let us march on till victory is won

Stony the road we trod  
Bitter the chastening rod  
Felt in the days when hope unborn had died  
Yet with a steady beat  
Have not our weary feet  
Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?  
We have come over a way that with tears has been watered  
We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered  
Out from the gloomy past

God of our weary years  
God of our silent tears  
Thou who has brought us thus far on the way  
Thou who has by Thy might Led us into the light  
Keep us forever in the path, we pray  
Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met Thee  
Lest, our hearts drunk with the wine of the world, we forget Thee  
Shadowed beneath Thy hand  
May we forever stand  
True to our God  
Till now we stand at last  
Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast  
True to our native land  
Our native land

## **Ain't That Good News**

### **Traditional**

I got a crown up in'a that Kingdom  
Ain'ta that'a good news  
I got a crown up in'a that Kingdom  
Ain'ta that'a good news  
I'm gonna lay down this world  
Gonna shoulder up my cross  
Gonna take it home to my Jesus  
Ain'ta that'a good news

I've got a robe up in'a that Kingdom  
Ain'ta that good news  
I've got a robe up in'a that Kingdom  
Ain'ta that good news  
I'm gonna lay down this world  
Shoulder up my cross  
Gonna take it home to my Jesus  
Ain'ta that good news

I got a home up in'a that Kingdom  
Ain'ta that good news  
I got a home up in'a that Kingdom  
Ain'ta that good news  
I'm gonna lay down this world  
Gonna shoulder up my cross  
I'm gonna take it home to my Jesus  
Ain'ta that good news?

## **Freedom Fighter**

### **Carole Boston Weatherford**

When I think about my people,  
I get all fired up inside,  
And the rage of generations  
Moves me like a rising tide.

I've seen the proof of hatred,  
Men lynched or left for dead.  
A stain assaults my memory  
With all the blood we've shed.

Someone must do something  
And there is no better time,  
So I'll reach down in my soul  
For strength to speak my mind.

I'll travel north and south  
And speak to all who'll listen.  
There ain't a man can shut me up,  
So lock me in a prison.

I'll put my thoughts on paper  
And make clear my demands,  
For that which is our due,  
Our right, in our native land.

I'll stand before the masses  
And try to make it plain;  
I am an American;  
Call me by my name.

I'll say what's in my heart  
And plead not just for me,  
But for my people everywhere  
Yearning to be free.