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Van Cortlandt Park Alliance Invites Bronx Community Members to Help Shape the Future of Park's Enslaved African Burial Ground

Bronx, NY — Van Cortlandt Park Alliance (VCPA) is calling on Bronx residents, descendants, artists, and neighbors to help shape the future of one of the borough's most sacred historic sites — the Enslaved African Burial Ground in Van Cortlandt Park.

Through the ***Reimagining the Enslaved African Burial Ground in Van Cortlandt Park*** project, supported by a \$310,000 grant from the Mellon Foundation, VCPA is asking the community to share their ideas for remembrance, design, and use of the site through a **public survey open through October 31**. The survey will help guide the next phase of a multi-year effort to honor and uplift the lives of the enslaved African and Indigenous people who helped shape this land.

New Yorkers are also invited to the **Reimagining: Fall Get-Together on Saturday, October 18, from 1–4 PM** at the burial ground. The free, family-friendly event will feature live music, art-making, and opportunities to connect directly with project partners to share feedback and visions for the future.

"This project belongs to the community," said **Stephanie Ehrlich, Executive Director of VCPA**. "Every response, every story, every idea helps ensure that the Enslaved African Burial Ground is honored with the dignity and care it deserves. We hope everyone will take a few minutes to fill out the survey and join us on October 18."

What began as community advocacy to recognize and protect the burial ground has grown into ***Reimagining the Enslaved African Burial Ground in Van Cortlandt Park***, a collaborative effort to re-envision the site through public art, cultural programming, and community-centered design. The project's origins date back more than a decade, when local historian Nick Dembowski of the Kingsbridge Historical Society brought renewed attention to the burial ground through archival research. A 2019 ground-penetrating radar survey revealed what appeared to be unmarked coffins, leading VCPA to successfully advocate for the site's protection and renaming in partnership with NYC Parks. In 2021, the burial ground and Van Cortlandt Lake were officially renamed as the **Enslaved African Burial Ground and Hester & Piero's Mill Pond** during VCPA's Juneteenth Celebration.

Building on those efforts, VCPA partnered with **Design Trust for Public Space** to lead the Reimagining project's planning and engagement phase. Together, they formed the **Legacy Council** — a diverse group of historians, artists, educators, students, and descendants who guide the project's creative and community engagement. Members include Bronx residents Mimi Peters-Davis, Julie Reyes (Community Board 8), artist Tijay Mohammed, musician Juan Usera, and representatives from local institutions such as Lehman College, Sarah Lawrence

College, Barnard College, Van Cortlandt House Museum, Kingsbridge Historical Society, Bronx Arts Ensemble, and NYC Parks.

“The Legacy Council has become a powerful space of reflection, learning, and creative imagining,” said **Ashley Hart Adams, VCPA’s Arts Integration Strategist**. “We’re uncovering ways to honor the ancestors through design, dialogue, and connection — and that starts with listening to the community.”

Over the past year, VCPA and the Legacy Council have hosted a series of public gatherings that use art, music, and storytelling to foster connection and reflection at the burial ground. Events like *In Transition* — a collaboration with the Weaving Liberation of All Beings collective — and a vibrant chalk art and music celebration led by Tijay Mohammed and Juan Usera & The Sambuco Tribe have turned the site into a living space for remembrance, creativity, and healing. Now, as VCPA plans the next stage of design, it is seeking broad public input through the survey. The responses will inform a **Design Ideas Competition** launching later this year, inviting artists, architects, and designers to propose creative concepts rooted in community feedback. Finalists will present their ideas in 2026.

“Through this process, we’re not just reimagining a site — we’re reimagining how history is remembered and who gets to shape that remembrance,” said **Michelle Augustine, Legacy Council member and professor at Lehman College**.

To get involved, share your vision for the Enslaved African Burial Ground by completing the community survey [HERE](#) before **October 31**.

You can also join the **Reimagining: Fall Get-Together on Saturday, October 18, from 1–4 PM** at the Enslaved African Burial Ground in Van Cortlandt Park for music, art, and community conversation.

To learn more about the *Reimagining the Enslaved African Burial Ground* project, visit www.vancortlandt.org/reimagining.

About the Van Cortlandt Park Alliance

The Van Cortlandt Park Alliance (VCPA) preserves, supports, and promotes the recreational, ecological, and historical value of Van Cortlandt Park, New York City’s third-largest park. Formed in 2019, VCPA works with NYC Parks and community partners to manage and advocate for the park’s natural and cultural resources. Learn more at vancortlandt.org.





PHOTOS: Giuliana Tepedino