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A gravestone at Drake Park. Photo: Shehzil Zahid

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FUNDS EARMARKED FOR DRAKE PARK SLAVE BURIAL GROUND ARE UNACCOUNTED FOR

By Shehzil Zahid () / December 26, 2019



(<https://huntspointexpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/image1.jpeg>)

A gravestone for a member of one of the landowning families at Drake Park. Photo: Shehzil Zahid

Justin Czarka, a school teacher at Public School 48 on Spofford Avenue, reached into a fanny pack under his winter jacket and pulled out a ring of keys. Thumbing through them, he selected one and twisted it into the thick lock. The key jammed—once, twice—before giving way.

“The caretaker for the park gave us a key when all this started,” said Czarka, pushing open the gate into the cemetery at [Drake Park](https://www.nycgovparks.org/parks/joseph-rodman-drake-park) (<https://www.nycgovparks.org/parks/joseph-rodman-drake-park>). Under the ground lie the remains of Hunts Point’s landowning families from the 1800s, the Drakes, Leggetts, Willetts and the Hunts.

Their slaves lie buried under trees outside the gate.

For years, plans to memorialize the burial ground where the slaves were laid to rest have been in limbo. Since 2014, Czarka and Phillip Panaritis, a retired official with the New York City Department of Education, have worked with PS 48 students to research the history of the site with the intention of memorializing the grounds and the forgotten ones buried below.

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BY SUNNY NAGPAUL () / FEBRUARY 14, 2023

At first there was a flurry of fanfare, with the preteen students who had helped conduct the initial research in the spotlight. In 2014, then-State Sen. Jeffrey Klein held a [press conference \(https://huntspointexpress.com/2014/01/24/students-uncover-secret-of-drake-par/\)](https://huntspointexpress.com/2014/01/24/students-uncover-secret-of-drake-par/) at the park, promising an \$180,000 investment to memorialize the site.

But five years later, both the State Senate Finance Committee and the city parks department said they had no record of ever receiving a legislative intent form from either Klein or his successor, State Sen. Alessandra Biaggi. Without that documentation the state senate cannot follow through.

In a phone interview in November, Klein, who now works for Mercury, a public strategy firm, said that the funds were indeed earmarked for the burial ground, though he did not recall whether those funds were actually transferred.

When the Express contacted Biaggi's office, a spokeswoman looked into it and said that the State Finance committee told her office that no evidence of allocated funds could be found and the allocation process cannot start without a legislative intent form. After further inquiry, the spokeswoman found that Klein had indeed designated and allocated the promised funds during his term but had not started the bureaucratic process of having them utilized. He would have had to submit a completed legislative intent form to the parks department, before receiving the approved form back and then submitting it to Senate Finance. Because he did not follow through, the funds are still sitting in limbo.

A spokesman for the parks department confirmed that the department never received the necessary documentation, and a final consensus was never reached on what the promised funds should be earmarked for if they ever received them.

News of the glitch came as a shock to the educators Panaritis and Czarka.

"I am horrified to learn about this apparent chicanery at the expense of poor schoolchildren and the oft-violated memory of hundreds of formerly forgotten enslaved African American men, women and children," Panaritis wrote in an email to The Express.

Czarka said the confusion surrounding the funds reflects a larger sense of unaccountability that has plagued progress on the burial ground project. Despite community efforts to memorialize the site, such as collaborating with The Point CDC to draw up plans for it, little has been accomplished.

At the height of the burial ground news coverage five years ago, Czarka and his students advocated for benches, trash cans and an amphitheater, to help inject some life into the moribund park while memorializing the forgotten slaves.

"I don't know if there's a yearning to have a memorial," Czarka said. "Perhaps people just don't care for what that means for society and our history. Should we care that there's people under the ground that nobody cared about?"

This story was updated on Jan. 7. It was updated again on Jan. 22, after State Sen. Biaggi's office responded to the Express' inquires about the whereabouts of the missing funds, alerting them to the problem.

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