



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

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Celebrating Black History: Mayor Adams Commissions the Sandy Ground, Staten Island Ferry Named for New York's First Free Black Community

ANDREW J. LANZA March 2, 2022



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people about the history of its cherished grounds. The naming of this vessel the Sandy Ground, which I fought for, will allow us to pass on the lessons about who we are and who we must be, to future generations."

New York City Mayor Eric Adams today commissioned the *Sandy Ground*, a new Staten Island Ferry vessel named for New York's first free Black community, which was settled in 1828 and served as a stop on the historic Underground Railroad. The *Sandy Ground* is the first Staten Island Ferry boat named to honor the rich history of Black New Yorkers living on Staten Island.

"I am honored to commission a new Staten Island Ferry named for a community of New Yorkers who represent the best of our city and our country," said **Mayor Adams**. "The settlers of Sandy Ground were our ancestors, and they worked hard to build a vibrant community that became a safe haven for so many seeking freedom. This boat will forever be a testament to them, their legacy, and their contributions to the New York City we live in today."

"As we pay tribute to a major part of New York's history today during Black History Month, the *Sandy Ground* ferry will ensure that this community's legacy continues to live on for future generations," said **Department of Transportation (DOT) Commissioner Ydanis Rodriguez**. "We applaud our Ferries Division and everyone who played a role in naming the boat after this iconic settlement."

"With the naming and dedication of the *Sandy Ground*, along with the adoption of the entire state-of-the-art *Ollis*-class fleet of ferries, which have received international acclaim, the New York City Department of Transportation not only honors the legacy of the diverse community that calls Staten Island home, but shows their passionate commitment to the

safe and secure operation of the busiest ferry service in the country,” said **Captain Zeita Merchant, commander, New York Sector, U.S. Coast Guard**. “I am especially honored as the first African American captain of the Port of New York to soon sign the official certificate that will forever etch the *Sandy Ground’s* legacy in New York Harbor.”

Sandy Ground’s history as a free Black community date back nearly 200 years to 1828, when ferry boat operator Captain John Jackson became the first Black person to own property on Staten Island, buying in what is now the South Shore community of Rossville. Over time, Sandy Ground was settled by Black oystermen who fled Maryland’s more restrictive laws. New York’s booming oyster trade allowed residents there to own their own property, boats, and businesses.

Five structures in the Sandy Ground community were designated as New York City landmarks by the Landmarks Preservation Commission in 2011, including three residential structures, a cemetery, and the A.M.E. Zion Church, which served as a major stop on the Underground Railroad. A.M.E. Zion remains an active church today, with descendants of Sandy Ground settlers still worshipping there.

A state-of-the-art, \$85 million, 4,500-person boat, the *Sandy Ground* is the second of three new ferries that will enter service this year, which are collectively known as the *Ollis*-class vessels. Together, the three boats represent a transformative upgrade for the nation’s busiest municipal ferry system; the three new ferries are larger, more modern, and better equipped for extreme weather than the existing fleet. They will feature popular design elements of past Staten Island ferries, phone charging outlets, and comfortable seating, as well as an oval upper-deck promenade that will, for the first time, serve as an outdoor “walking track” for riders.

The *Sandy Ground* is expected to be in service by this spring. The first boat in the class, the *Staff Sergeant Michael H. Ollis*, took its inaugural ride earlier this month. The final *Ollis*-class ferry is expected to be commissioned later this year.

“The *Sandy Ground* honors and preserves the legacy of New York’s oldest, free Black community, which served as a crucial stop on the Underground Railroad, the historic gateway to freedom for those looking to escape the shackles of slavery,” said **U.S. Senator Kirsten Gillibrand**. “This addition to the Staten Island Ferry vessel system not only adds a much-needed infrastructural resource for Staten Island residents but it also commemorates a piece of American history that should never be forgotten.”

"The Staten Island Ferry is one of New York City's most iconic symbols and has been an integral part of our city's transportation system for more than 200 years," said **Congresswoman Nicole Malliotakis**. "Naming one of our new state-of-the-art vessels after Sandy Ground, the oldest continuously inhabited free black settlement in our country, is a fantastic way to celebrate our city's rich African American culture and keep its history alive for generations to come. Commissioning the Sandy Ground Ferry is a beautiful way to celebrate Black History Month."

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"This is a wonderful tribute to actual Black history on Staten Island," said **New York State Senator Diane Savino**. "The Sandy Ground settlement is a part of the rich and diverse history of African-Americans here, and the naming of our newest addition to the fleet is one of the highest honors we can bestow on this community, the legacy of Ferry Captain John Johnson and his neighbors. The Sandy Ground Historical Society is one of the jewels of this island. Congratulations to everyone who helped make this possible."

"I am thrilled to see this important part of our community's history — indeed, our nation's history — be commemorated with the naming of this new ferry boat," said **New York State Assemblymember Michael Reilly**. "I will continue to work so that the story of the Sandy Ground settlers can be known for generations to come."

"I am honored to stand with Mayor Adams and DOT Commissioner Rodriguez to commission the second Staten Island Ferry, in honor of New York's first free Black settlement, Sandy Ground, during Black History Month," said **New York City Council Majority Whip Selvena N. Brooks-Powers, chair, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure**. "I am thankful for former Councilmember Debi Rose's commitment to championing the naming of this state-of-the-art vessel, highlighting Staten Island's abolitionist roots and the significance of Black oystermen. Commissioning this vessel as *Sandy Ground* is a physical representation of the rich legacy of African-American mariners and underscores Staten Island's importance in the Underground Railroad."

"Naming this ferry the *Sandy Ground* is a fitting tribute to the first Black settlers who came to our borough nearly 200 years ago, and whose desire to live as fully free Americans was so closely connected to the water," said **New York City Councilmember Joe Borelli**. "It was on this site in Rossville that John Jackson operated the first direct ferry between Staten Island and Manhattan, and where many of his fellow settlers made their livelihood in the borough's oyster trade. This new boat will help remind us all of their stories and the important role

they played in our city's rich history."

"The naming of the *Sandy Ground* ferry is a remarkable tribute to the collective history of Staten Island's Black communities," said **New York City Councilmember Kamillah Hanks**. "As a Black councilmember and a native of Staten Island, the deep significance of this recognition for Black New Yorkers is not lost on me. Moreover, I am especially proud that I have a descendant of Sandy Ground as a member of my staff, my chief of staff, Marci Bishop."

"The commissioning of the *Sandy Ground* is a historic moment for the Black community and the descendants of Sandy Ground," said **former New York City Councilmember Debi Rose**. "This moving monument memorializes the history of Sandy Ground and acknowledges the existence of a thriving community that played a pivotal part in Staten Island and New York City's history. The *Sandy Ground* will proudly ride the waves of a new consciousness as it joins the fleet of the New York ferry system and will serve as a significant reminder every day to thousands of Staten Islanders, New Yorkers, and tourists from around the world of the rich history of the Sandy Ground farmers, oystermen, and entrepreneurs who developed a thriving self-sustaining community. I am so excited, and I want to thank the Department of Transportation, and especially former Commissioner Polly Trottenberg, for taking my dream and making it a reality — lifting the contributions of Sandy Ground out of the shadows of our distant past and into the very fabric of our everyday existence."

"Today is the day we pay homage to Moses and Silas Harris, free Black men who in 1828 had the foresight to recognize the value of land and landownership," said **Julie Moody Lewis, president, Sandy Ground Historical Society**. "They laid the foundation for a community that served as a safe haven for people of African descent, seeking the promise of the American dream and the right to all freedoms, including the right to education, occupation, and religion. We thank the City of New York for recognizing and embracing that vision, and ensuring that our history will always be a part of the fabric of the City of New York."

“This vessel honors our nation’s African-American heritage and will tell the story of the landmark Sandy Ground community,” said **Joey D’Isernia, president, Eastern Shipbuilding Group**, which built the *Ollis*-class ferries. “These incredible vessels are receiving international recognition for their superior design and capabilities. We thank our partners for their dedication and exceptional quality in the production of these ferries.”