

Chapter 2

HISTORIC BACKGROUND OF THE AFRICAN BURIAL GROUND

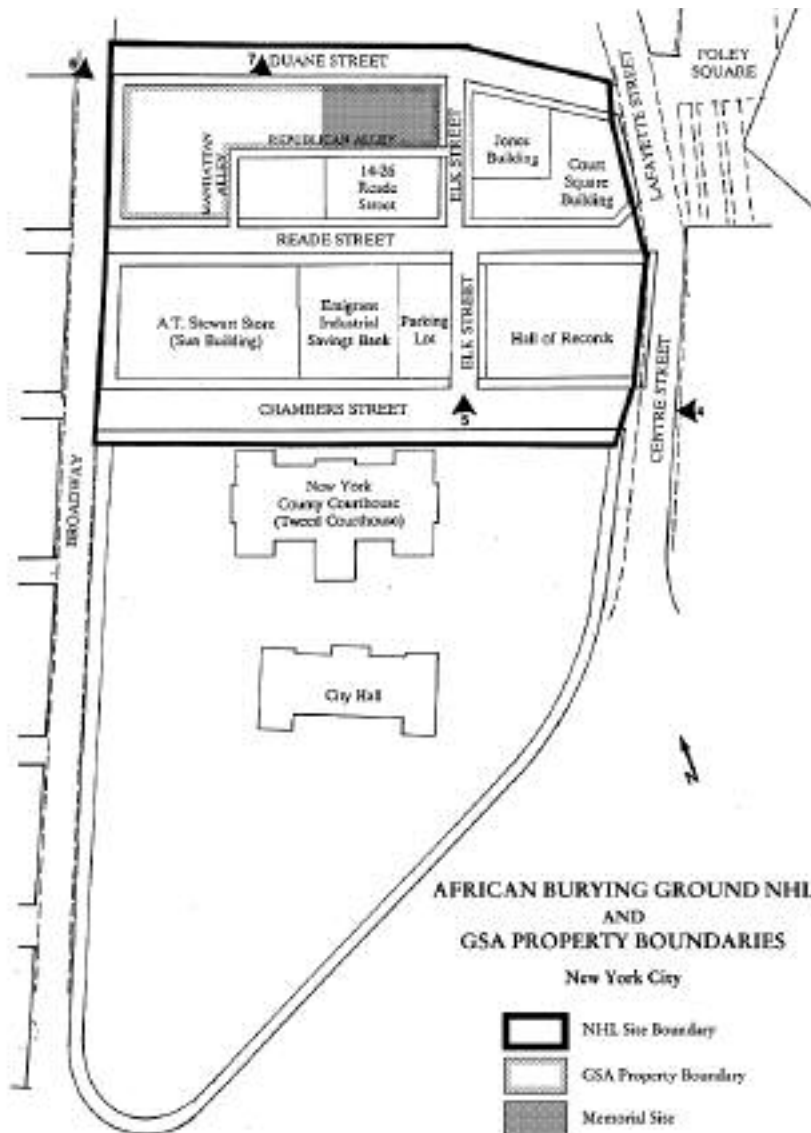


The African Burial Ground Site

The African Burial Ground is a deeply buried archeological site in Lower Manhattan, New York City, the remains of a cemetery used for free and enslaved Africans primarily during the eighteenth century. The site covers approximately seven acres bounded by Duane Street on the north, Chambers Street on the south, Centre and Lafayette Streets on the east and Broadway

Map showing the boundaries of the African Burial Ground.

Courtesy of National Park Service



to the west. It is located in Block Numbers 153, 154 and 155 in the Borough of Manhattan in the heart of the city's civic center area.

The preservation of archeological remains of the early burial ground in the current heavily developed urban setting of Lower Manhattan is explained by the topography of the area and land alterations that took place in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to facilitate the expansion of New York City to the north. The cemetery was located in a ravine that led east-northeast from the area of Broadway toward the "Collect Pond" which was a deep spring-fed pond. During the late 1700s and early 1800s, the ravine and Collect Pond were filled with soil and rock from the leveling of nearby hills and high ground along Broadway to facilitate the extension of streets and the laying out of building lots.

The African Burial Ground offers important archeological evidence of significant aspects of the lives of people buried there. The site reveals evidence of the institution of chattel slavery that took peoples from their native Africa across a vast ocean to a world of forced servitude. The research has revealed the physical scars that hard work, difficult living conditions and violent society left on their bodies as well as evidence of how they maintained their cultural identity despite the control exercised over them. It chronicles their contribution to the development of New York City and how the building of the city covered their burial place. The site is an important reminder that slavery had a strong and immediate presence in the northern colonies, in addition to the economic relationship between the northern mercantile class and plantation owners who used enslaved laborers on their properties in the southern colonies and the West Indies. The African Burial Ground has also served as a significant local focal point for people interested in learning about their past, educating others about the African Diaspora, and addressing its effects on peoples to this day.



Significance of the African Burial Ground

The African Burial Ground was designated a National Historic Landmark by the Secretary of the Interior on April 19, 1993. National Historic Landmarks are nationally significant historic places designated by the Secretary of the Interior because they possess exceptional value or quality in illustrating or interpreting the heritage of the United States. The following section examines the significance of the African Burial Ground using a condensed version of the significance statement from the landmark nomination and supplemented with findings from the research conducted by the Howard University team that studied the archeological, historical, and physical anthropological aspects of the site and from other scholarly and management sources relevant for understanding the site.

The African Burial Ground is of national significance because of its unprecedented potential to yield information about the lives of Africans and African Americans in an eighteenth-century urban context. Approximately one-third acre of the seven-acre site was archeologically excavated and has yielded information of major scientific importance. The site held spiritual, social and cultural meaning for this predominantly enslaved population, and the survival of the burial ground provides a unique opportunity to acknowledge and preserve their history. This site may well be the only preserved urban eighteenth-century African burial ground in the Americas. The 419 individuals whose remains were excavated from the African Burial Ground represent a much larger population who played a role in the formation and development of American society.

The first Africans arrived in New Amsterdam around 1625 (although a record of the precise arrival date is unknown). Under Dutch rule, enslaved Africans worked on building the fort, mills, and new stone houses. In 1664, the British conquered the Dutch colony, and New Amsterdam became New York, named

for James II, the Duke of York, the principal investor in the Company of Royal Adventurers Trading to Africa. Many privileges and rights accorded to enslaved and free Africans under the Dutch were rescinded within forty years of the switch to British rule. Enslaved Africans were then subjected to a highly restrictive legal system, one which was put in place to secure England's valuable colonial possessions in the Western Hemisphere and which resulted in severe physical and social coercion.

The slave trade was integral to the development of the eighteenth-century British colonial system. This system was based on the



establishment of settler colonies in the West Indies and North America, on the use of coerced labor to extract wealth from the land, and on the profitable trading of enslaved peoples. The institution of trans-Atlantic chattel slavery is one of the tragic consequences of the European conquest of the New World. The African Diaspora constitutes one of the most significant demographic, cultural, and economic phenomena in world history, and it was a key element in the British colonial structure and in the development of the Americas.

During the eighteenth century, New York was one of four important northern shipping

New York City's Common Council designated the Meal Market at the foot of Wall Street as the authorized site for the purchase, sale and hire of enslaved laborers in 1711.



points in the Atlantic trading network, along with Philadelphia, Boston, and Newport. As labor was scarce throughout the colony and free immigrants preferred to earn their living by farming, New York merchants depended on enslaved laborers to operate the port and supplement the pool of skilled craftsmen in such trades as ship carpentry and printing. They also were employed in heavy transport,

By the onset of the Revolutionary War, slavery was firmly imbedded in American life. The common image of bondage only on southern tobacco or cotton plantations must be adjusted, for slavery was also a way of life in the North. Although American slavery has been the subject of a vast historical literature, slave communities in the North have received less attention than those of the South. And, as

a rule, slave life in the eighteenth century is much less understood than that of the nineteenth. This is partly due to the extreme scarcity of accounts by Africans and African Americans in the early period, whereas for the nineteenth century, historians can turn to a larger body of recorded narratives of people once enslaved.

The richness of the record from New York City's African Burial Ground is clearly extraordinary compared to other African burial sites that have been studied and is clearly significant well beyond the local context.

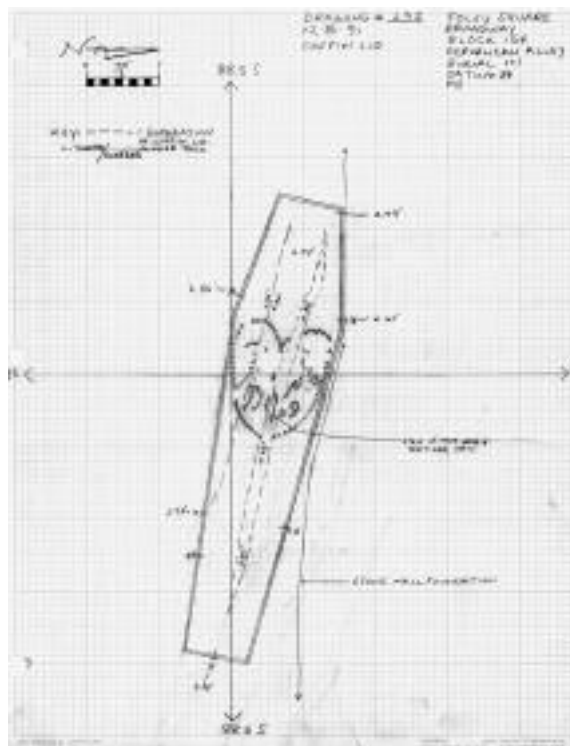
Archaeologists and physical anthropologists from around the world have expressed interest in the finds. The site provides new insights into the biological life-course of people who were enslaved and transported from Africa or born into slavery in America. It provides an extremely important body of data to be made available for comparative research.

Because the burial ground was used for at least one hundred years, analysis of archeological remains from the site may allow researchers to address questions about changes in American social and economic life during the colonial period and the period of the early republic: How did the treatment of



Coffin lid with Sankofa symbol made of metal tacks.

Courtesy of U.S. General Services Administration



construction work, and domestic labor, as well as in farming and milling.

At least 6,800 African slaves were imported into New York between 1700 and 1774. Approximately 2,800 (41.2 percent) were brought directly from Africa, while the other 4,000 were brought via the West Indies or one of the other American coastal ports, typically Charleston. In addition to enslaved Africans, there were numerous free Africans in New York. Some of the free Africans were descendants of people who had been freed by the Dutch West India Company during its tenure in New Amsterdam.



enslaved Africans or the quality of life of free Africans change over the course of the eighteenth century, as evidenced in nutritional profiles, diseases, causes of mortality, and injuries? Did the funerary practices of Africans in New York change over time? Is the process of cultural transformation visible in the material record? These are questions that await the completion of the archeological analysis and reporting on the site and its integration with information from the skeletal biology and history studies.

The examination of burials from this site revealed that a distinction could be made between African-born and American-born individuals, contributing to the development of a base-line biological profile of the first generation of the African Diaspora. Advanced analytical techniques may make it possible to determine the regions of origin in Africa of some of the individuals who died in colonial New York. This will contribute evidence to scholarship on the geography of the colonial trade in human beings, as well as an opportunity to study origins of cultural practices. Based on the results of their genetic, historical, and archeological research, the Howard team determined that the origin and affiliation of most of the people buried in the African Burial Ground was from a variety of known states and empires mainly, but not exclusively in West and West Central Africa. Additionally, chemical analyses and ethno-historical research suggest that most of the adults buried in the African Burial Ground were African-born and had survived the trans-Atlantic passage to the Western Hemisphere. On the other hand, those who died under age eight appear to have been born in New York. Some individuals may have grown up in the Caribbean.

The physical anthropological research provides information about nutrition, disease, physical stress, and injuries of individuals excavated from the cemetery. These conditions often leave traces on the bones and teeth, which are preserved in the human skeleton. Measurement of skeletal trace elements, dental enamel development, skull

base, height, stature, and bone histology and lesions provide data that are important in reconstructing individual biological histories. Studies of enamel defects provide information on stress in the population of children interred in the African Burial Ground.

Individuals between the ages of nine and sixteen showed high stress that perhaps can be linked directly to the slave trade, as this was the prime age range for individuals subjected to enslavement and the trans-Atlantic passage. The data also suggests that infant and childhood health were worse for individuals who were born in New York than those who were probably born in Africa and died as adults in New York. Analysis of the age and sex of the human skeletal remains indicated that mortality was greatest for infants 0-5 months (9.6 percent), adults 30-34 years old (9.1 percent), and adults 45-49 years old (8.3 percent). Mortality for children under 16-years-old was 43.2 percent based on a sample of 301 individuals, and 55.3 percent of them died by the age of two. The skeletal biology study consistently found evidence that suggests strenuous labor began at an early age for at least some individuals.

In addition to the biology of individuals and populations, study of human remains from intact burials yields information about funerary practices and even religious belief. For example, the position and orientation of the graves at the African Burial Ground is very uniform, pointing to strong religious precepts. Social relations within the community may be indicated by the spatial arrangements of burials and apparent relationships between some of the interments. The discovery of women buried with newborns or still-born babies is an example of how the site evokes the poignancy of family life and death in a long-vanished community. Funerary practices embody core aspects of cultural and symbolic systems, and for enslaved people in the colony of New York, this may be all the more significant because funerals offered a chance to express cultural identity in an unsupervised context. Even though laws prohibited customary night funerals and gatherings of large numbers of Africans, the evi-



dence from the burial ground indicates that it continued as a focus of community identity for nearly a hundred years.

During the eighteenth century, New York had a much larger African population than either Philadelphia or Boston, and a slightly higher population proportionally than Newport. In 1703, there were approximately 700 Africans in New York, or 14.4 percent of the population. The numbers grew to 2,444 by 1746, representing 20.9 percent of the population, and peaked at 3,137 by 1771, though by then Africans were again only 14.3 percent of all New York residents. It should be noted that prior to 1756, all Africans, enslaved or free, were counted simply as “negroes” or “blacks” in the New York censuses. Most Africans lived in the small area of the city proper, at the southernmost tip of Manhattan, and this concentration increased as the century progressed and African ownership of farmlands to the north of the city constricted. Enslaved Africans were owned by people in all walks of life, including artisans, merchants, clergy, and mariners.

On plantations, quarters for enslaved Africans were normally set apart, and can be easily identified for archaeological study. In cities, however, most of the enslaved lived in their owners’ houses, and a separate material record cannot be readily isolated. The material culture of a slave neighborhood or household in New York cannot be studied in the same way as that of most other ethnic groups. For this reason, it is, ironically, the burial place of such a community that provides the clearest opportunity to observe a distinguishable material record of their lives.

The African Burial Ground and nearby Common were important in other aspects of the culture of African New York in the eighteenth century. During the “Pinkster” Day celebrations held in what is now City Hall Park (the exact location may have been the African Burial Ground itself), Africans from as far as forty miles away joined residents in “beating banjos, singing African songs, drinking, and worst of all, laughing in a way that

seemed to set their very hearts rattling within their ribs” (James Fenimore Cooper, *Satanstoe* [New York: American Book Company, 1937]). Pinkster Day was Christian Pentecost or Whitsuntide, but its celebration in New York, Philadelphia, and other Middle Atlantic colonies and states took on a distinctly African air.

The location of the African Burial Ground itself was symbolically and socially significant in the life of early New York. Forbidden to inter their dead in church cemeteries, and probably wishing to attain a degree of privacy and autonomy in their funerary practices, New York’s Africans appropriated a parcel of ground outside the town, in a “remote” place. Thus today this site symbolizes both the oppression under which enslaved peoples lived in America, and their ability to persist in honoring their African heritage while forging a new culture. It is also significant that many of those buried at the site probably helped materially in the building of the city that chose to build over rather than formally acknowledge their final resting place. The subsequent history of this sacred ground symbolically underscores European Americans’ systematic denial of the importance of the contribution of African Americans to the development of our nation toward an urban, industrial world power.

Ethnic groups in America each have individual histories of arrival, encounter, struggle, assimilation, and persistence of cultural heritage. The relationship between Africans and the larger society in the British colonies and the newly formed nation during the eighteenth century was largely determined by the legal institution of slavery and its economic and social correlates. Thus the experience of the ethnic group “African Americans” needs to be understood as different from that of other immigrant groups.

Project History

In 1987 GSA began planning for increased federal agency office, courtroom and support space in the Civic Center/Foley Square area of Lower Manhattan. In March 1989, GSA



and the Advisory Council for Historic Preservation (ACHP) entered into a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) that addressed GSA's responsibilities under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 to consider any effects on historic resources that might result from its proposed construction of a federal building at 290 Broadway.

Heritage Conservation and Interpretation, Inc (HCI) subcontracted with GSA's environmental review consultant to assess the potential for historical and archeological resources in the project area at 290 Broadway where GSA was proposing to construct a thirty-four-story office tower with a connected four-story pavilion adjacent to Duane Street. The parcel of land at 290 Broadway was identified as part of the city's "Commons" (public lands used first for communal purposes such as grazing cattle and, later, as the site for the city's public institutions). Maerschallck's 1755 "A Plan of the City of New York from an Actual Survey" identified an area labeled as the "Negros Burial Ground", located immediately north of the city's palisade and adjacent to a fresh water pond called the "Collect". An earlier reference to the burial ground was found in a letter dating from 1712. Since Trinity Church banned the burial of Africans from its cemetery in 1697, earlier use of the area for burials may have occurred.

HCI concluded initially that the cemetery would not have survived the land disturbance associated with the construction of foundations, basements, utilities and other infrastructure during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries except in one area where the existence of Republican Alley might have limited ground disturbance. Archeological testing began on the site on May 20, 1991 and later that month, after the removal of strata that included human remains disturbed by earlier construction, intact human burials were encountered beneath Republican Alley. The soil profiles of the excavations indicated the sloping nature of the original topography of the area and the extent of the overlying 16 to 28 feet depth of landfill that protected portions of the burial ground from nineteenth

and twentieth century construction. HCI and Lehman College's Metropolitan Forensic Anthropology Team (MFAT) began excavation of the burials in September 1991.

In December 1991, the General Services Administration, the Advisory Council for Historic Preservation, and the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission amended the Section 106 Memorandum of Agreement to more specifically define the responsibilities of GSA. The amendment called for preparation of a research design to assist in structuring the investigations, and defined actions including Analysis and Report Preparation; Public Involvement; Reburial, Curation and Disposition; and Site Interpretation.

In June 1992, GSA engaged John Milner Associates to assume administration of the project as it had grown beyond the capacity of HCI to manage. At the end of July, GSA temporarily halted the excavation. From late September into early October, excavation of partially excavated burials was finished and the site closed down. Approximately one-third acre of the seven-acre site was excavated.

During the year, researchers from Howard University had articulated the importance of a project research design that would approach examination of the African Burial Ground from an African Diasporan perspective and would carefully examine the archeological, historical, and physical anthropological records to understand how subjugating African people to enslavement in this northern colony affected them physically and culturally. The Howard University team and John Milner Associates collaborated to prepare a research design for the analysis phase of the archeological excavation of the African Burial Ground. GSA subsequently negotiated a contract with Howard University to conduct research on the archeology, history, and skeletal biology of the site with Dr. Michael Blakey as Principal Investigator.

Concurrent with the excavation of the



human burials at the project site came public and political protests reaching from local to federal levels, eventually resulting in the cancellation of a portion of the construction project. The descendant African Diasporic community reacted strongly against what it viewed as the desecration of the remains of their ancestors by the federal government. Their discussions and meetings with GSA did not produce answers and responses that they felt addressed their concerns about the treatment and preservation of the African Burial Ground and those interred there.

Shortly after excavation of the human remains began in September 1991, New York City Mayor David Dinkins became involved in questioning GSA about the project. Various meetings and press conferences followed along with the formation of advisory groups into mid-1992. Congressional hearings in New York City led by Illinois Congressman Gus Savage, Chairman of the Committee on Public Works and Transportation Subcommittee on Public Buildings and Grounds resulted in a call for a halt to excavation on the site which occurred on July 29, 1992.

A decision was made that a federal advisory committee of primarily descendant African community leaders and professionals should be established to make recommendations to GSA with regard to its Section 106 responsibilities for the African Burial Ground. In October 1992, the Federal Steering Committee for the African Burial Ground, New York, NY was established by the Administrator of GSA in accordance with the Federal Advisory Committee Act to represent the interests of the community and make recommendations to GSA and Congress regarding the present and future activities affecting the pavilion portion of the federal construction known as the African Burial Ground. Shortly after the establishment of the Federal Steering Committee, President George H. W. Bush signed Public Law 102-393 directing GSA to abandon construction of the pavilion and authorizing funds for redesign of the pavil-

ion site and memorialization of the African Burial Ground. In 1993, the Federal Steering Committee presented seven recommendations on how the African Burial Ground and the history of the African presence in New York City should be commemorated. Although these recommendations largely paralleled the Section 106 agreement, they differed in several significant ways including a recommendation for a museum.

After completion of the field portion of the data recovery program, GSA undertook completion of the remaining requirements of the Memorandum of Agreement through a series of contracts and agreements with consultants, agencies, and organizations.

GSA contracted with John Milner Associates in 1993 to manage, staff, and operate the Office of Public Education and Interpretation (OPEI) to provide information to the New York community and the public at large about the evolving research efforts involved in rediscovering information about the lives and deaths of Africans in early New York.

During the mid-1990s, GSA engaged the NPS Harpers Ferry Center (which conducts interpretive planning and design) for assistance in preparing a scope of work for the design of the African Burial Ground interpretive program. In 1997, GSA advertised for design and construction of an interpretive center to be located on the first floor of the federal building at 290 Broadway. This contract was awarded to IDI Construction, Inc., of New York City on April 29, 2000. Although IDI did start work on the project, late in 2004, IDI and GSA mutually agreed to the termination of the contract. NPS is currently assisting GSA in developing the interpretive program for the African Burial Ground, of which this management recommendations report is a part.

On December 29, 1997, GSA launched its design competition with a request for proposals for the exterior memorial to be constructed on the former pavilion site. The National Park Service (NPS) under their



2003 Interagency Agreement assisted GSA in completing the selection of the memorial design. On Friday, April 29, 2005, Rodney Léon was announced as the designer who will create the African Burial Ground memorial.

Throughout the 1990s and into the next decade, the local descendant stakeholders had continued to pressure GSA to proceed with completion of its obligations to implement both the legal requirements of the Section 106 Memorandum of Agreement and its Amendment, as well as the resolutions of the Federal Steering Committee. Of particular significance to the local community was the commitment to reburial of the human remains.

The African American community had grown increasingly impatient with the slow progress of the technical analyses called for in the Section 106 agreement. The long awaited reburial ceremonies for the 419 individuals and their associated artifacts finally occurred in 2003. GSA contracted with the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture to organize events marking the return of the human remains from Howard University in Washington, D. C., to their final resting place in New York City. Activities began in Washington, D.C. on September 30, and culminated with reburial ceremonies at the African Burial Ground in New York City on October 4. Commemorative events were also held in Baltimore, Maryland; Wilmington, Delaware; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and Newark, New Jersey as the coffins containing the remains of four selected individuals (one adult male, one adult female, one male child, and one female child) passed through these cities in route to New York where they were placed into a wooden crypt with the other 415 individuals excavated from the cemetery.



In 2002, GSA engaged the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, St. Louis District, Curation and Archives Analysis Branch to manage the Howard University contract for research on the archeology, history, and physical anthropology of the site as well as to plan for the curation of the data from the site. The skeletal biology and history components of the research were completed in late 2004 and are available on GSA's project web site (www.africanburialground.gov). The archeology research report is nearing completion.

At the request of GSA, the Army Corps was also engaged to assist with the long-term curation of the associated records generated from the archaeological investigations conducted at the African Burial Ground site and the analysis of the excavated remains and artifacts. GSA is responsible for ensuring that these African Burial Ground records are maintained in compliance with the standards and requirements of the Curation of Federally-Owned and Administered Archeological Collections (36CFR Part 79) regulation. The Army Corps examined and evaluated nine potential repositories for the African Burial Ground Collection and has presented its findings and recommendations to GSA.

Procession moves up Broadway to the African Burial Ground, where 419 remains were reinterred in October 2003.

Courtesy of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture

