

African Burial Ground

African Burial Ground
National Monument
New York

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



*You may bury me in the bottom of
Manhattan. I will rise. My people
will get me. I will rise out of the
huts of history's shame.*

—Maya Angelou, 2003



The heart-shaped West African symbol called the Sankofa translates to “learn from the past to prepare for the future.” The Sankofa appears in many places at the African Burial Ground National Monument, reminding us that the 419 Africans and African descendants buried here so long ago have much to teach us. Scientific study of the human remains reveals that work was hard, life was short, and people often met a violent end. Yet these people were lovingly laid to rest by family and friends.

Long neglected, overlain by two centuries of progress, the African Burial Ground reemerged in 1991 during construction of a federal office building. Widely regarded as one of the most

important archeological finds of the 20th century, the rediscovery also sparked controversy. Protesters, outraged at the destruction of sacred ground, demanded that construction be halted. Local activism became a national effort to preserve the site and honor the contributions of New York's first Africans. A traditional African burial ceremony took place in 2003, when all 419 human remains were reburied on the site.

Established in 2006, African Burial Ground National Monument is a place to contemplate the spirit of the Sankofa. Obscure individuals from the past come alive again with the lessons of sacrifice, perseverance, respect, power of community, and the continual hope for a better future.

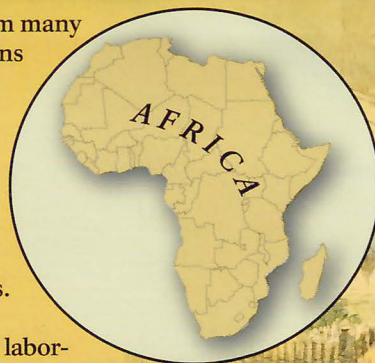


Left: Map of burial ground, 1755; man beside wooden reburial coffins, 2003. Above and below: halfpenny, silver pendant, cufflink, and button—rare and treasured objects to Africans in Colonial America—found with burials. Left and background: Sankofa symbol.



Africans in Early New York

Slave traders preyed upon Africans from many parts of the continent—including regions that are now the countries of Sierra Leone, Ghana, Cameroon, Nigeria, Mozambique, and Madagascar, among many others. They spoke different languages and practiced diverse customs and religions. Separated from their people, chained, and packed in ships' holds, few ever returned to their homes.



In 1626, traders brought the first enslaved laborers to the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam, now Lower Manhattan. Under Dutch West India Company rules these “Company slaves” had certain rights: they could own property, file grievances, be baptized, and marry. In 1644, 11 male enslaved Africans petitioned and won partial freedom and over 100 acres of farmland that became known as “the Land of the Blacks.” In return, they paid the Dutch West India Company annually with corn, wheat, peas, beans, “and one fat hog.” This “freedom” was tenuous at best, and the company still considered children of freed parents enslaved. When England took control of the colony in 1664 New Amsterdam became New York and slavery codes became far more oppressive. By the 1720s, enslaved or free, no blacks owned land.

Slaves accounted for about one quarter of colonial New York's labor force. Often using skills they brought from their homelands, they worked side-by-side with free people and European indentured servants. Men cleared farmland, filled swampland, and built city improvements like Broadway and The Wall. Enslaved African women toiled in their owners' homes, carrying large water vessels, cooking from raw ingredients over a fire, boiling water for laundry, and caring for their owners' families in addition to their own. Children started work young. Common causes of death were malnutrition, physical strain, punishment, and diseases like yellow fever and smallpox. Despite extraordinary assaults on their humanity, these Africans and their descendants found dignity and community through familiar cultural rituals, including burial of the dead.



Charles Lilly's illustration recreates an African burial ceremony outside the city palisade sometime after 1745.

Sacred Ground

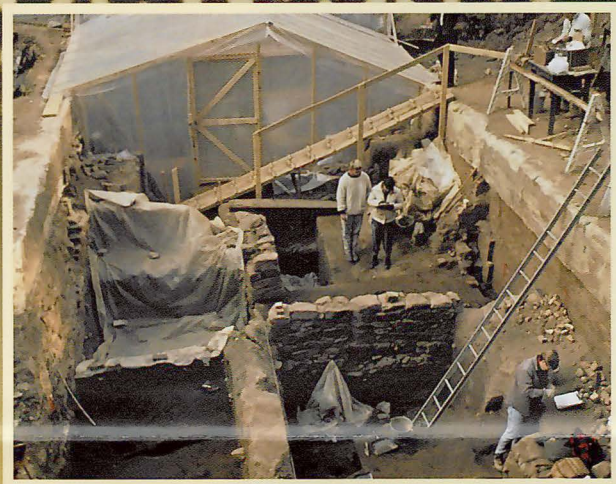
From 1626 through the late 1700s, Africans and African descendants gathered when they could to bury their loved ones. The original “Negros Burial Ground,” as it was labeled on a 1755 map (*upper left*), covered 6.6 acres and included the area that is today's African Burial Ground National Monument. For most of the colonial era and even beyond, this was the only cemetery for some 15,000 Africans and African descendants.

No accounts survive from the people who buried friends and loved ones here, but we know quite a bit about the cemetery's history. A 1697 British law banned African burials in New York City's public cemetery, so the African burial ground lay north of the city limits near a ravine. In 1745 the city expanded northward, and a new defensive wall—the “palisade”—bisected the sacred burial ground.

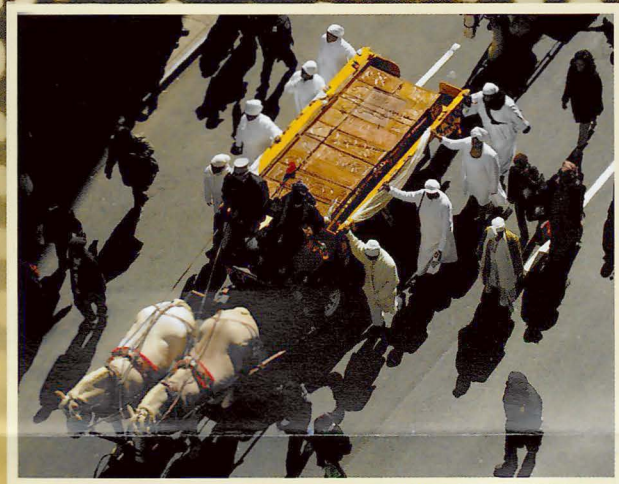
Colonial laws prohibited enslaved Africans from gathering in groups of 12 or more or holding burials after sunset. Although these laws made funerals essentially illegal, Africans managed to adhere to their traditions. They buried their dead individually in coffins, heads toward the west, so as to face east when they arose in the afterlife. Straight pins secured the burial shrouds; coins covered closed eyes. Some burials also included reflective objects, buttons, jewelry, and shells. One young child wore a silver pendant around the neck. A woman with front teeth filed in an hourglass shape had beads placed around her waist. A man's coffin lid had a heart-shaped pattern—perhaps a Sankofa—created with brass tacks and nails.

The city closed the African burial ground in the 1790s and divided the land into lots for sale. Over the next two centuries, the growth of New York City obscured the graves. Layers of buildings and fill material covered and protected the human remains until the burial ground's rediscovery in 1991.

Rediscovery, Reinterment, Remembrance



Archeological work at burial site



Funeral procession for reburials, 2003



Libation ceremony honors ancestors



Earthen mounds cover reinterments

Long forgotten by most of the world, the African Burial Ground came to light in 1991. During the early construction phase for the federal office building at 290 Broadway, workers found human burials. Over the next two years, about an acre of the original 6.6-acre cemetery was excavated, and 419 skeletal remains were removed from the ground.

Controversy immediately arose over the disturbance of the sacred ground and questions about whether the remains were being respectfully cared for. African descendants, clergy, politicians, scientists, historians, and concerned citizens united to halt the excavation. The protesters' voices, petitions, and a 24-hour vigil at the site in 1992 succeeded. Congress acted to stop construction to allow time to alter the building plans to provide space for memorialization.

The remains were transferred to Howard University in Washington, DC, for study at the Cobb Laboratory, one of the nation's leading African American research institutions. Noted scholars and researchers conducted intense examination and analysis of the



The map above shows the estimated extent of the historic African Burial Ground in modern Lower Manhattan. The wooden palisade—the city's northern boundary in 1746—stood where Chambers Street is now. The national monument includes a one-third-acre portion of the original 6.6-acre cemetery. *Top and bottom background:* Bogolanfini cloth (also called mudcloth) from Mali.

history, physical anthropology, and archeology of the burial ground site and the human remains. The careful study of each bone, fragment, and accompanying burial objects revealed a wealth of information about life and death for Africans in colonial New York.

In October 2003, all 419 remains were placed in mahogany coffins from Ghana that were hand-carved and lined with Kente cloth. Thus began the six-day Rites of Ancestral Return, organized by the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. The journey started at Howard University, where thousands attended the departure ceremony. The procession, greeted by crowds along the way, continued through Baltimore, Wilmington, Philadelphia, Newark, and Jersey City, and finally ended in New York City. The coffins were reinterred very near where the remains were originally found. Seven earthen mounds now mark this site.

Meanwhile, community activists rallied to preserve part of the burial ground and commemorate African history and culture in New York City. Their efforts led to the creation of New York City's first below-

ground landmark in 1993. In April 2005 the design for the outdoor memorial was selected in a public review process managed by the National Park Service in partnership with the General Services Administration (GSA). At the center is a "cosmogram," the crossroads of rebirth in Congo tradition. This contemporary architectural expression combines feminine and masculine forms and is inspired by art, music, painting, and sculpture. It is oriented toward the rising Sun along an east-west axis, the same way that the bodies were buried.

Created by Presidential proclamation on February 27, 2006 and dedicated on October 5, 2007, the African Burial Ground National Monument is a place of remembrance. The people and their stories teach us how free and enslaved Africans contributed to the physical, cultural, and spiritual world of Lower Manhattan in colonial times—and to our nation's beginning.



Alvin Ailey Dancers perform at Reinterment Ceremony

Your Visit to African Burial Ground



General Information
African Burial Ground National Monument is in Lower Manhattan at Broadway and Duane Street. It is easily reached by public transportation: take the 4, 5, 6, R, J, or Z subway line to Brooklyn Bridge/City Hall; take the A, C, or E line to Chambers Street; or take the 2 or 3 line to Park Place. Bus lines include the M5, M9, M22, M103.

For group tours, make advance reservations to ensure staff availability and arrive 30 minutes before your tour start time. To arrange for off-site presentations, call 212-637-2019. There is a resource library; schedule appointments in advance.

The national monument is available for special events. Permits are required; contact the park staff for information.

Accessibility
We strive to make our facilities, services, and programs accessible to all. For information, ask at the visitor center or visit our website.

Things to See and Do
The visitor center, opened in February 2010, is designed by Roberta Washington Architects, PC. It houses exhibits about the burial ground and the lives of Africans and African descendants in New Amsterdam and New York. It also includes a theater and a bookstore. Park rangers present educational programs.

The lobby of the Ted Weiss Federal Building displays commissioned artwork including *Renewal* by Tomie Arai, *Unearthed* by Frank Bender, *Untitled* by Roger Brown, *Africa Rising* by Barbara Chase-Riboud, *America Song* by Clyde Lynds, and *The New Ring Shout* by Houston Conwill, Joseph De Pace, and Estella Conwill Majozo.

Outdoor Memorial
The memorial is behind the Ted Weiss Federal Building at the corner of Duane Street and African Burial Ground Way (Elk Street). There are no restrooms outside near the memorial.

The Circle of the Diaspora (photo at left) includes signs and symbols engraved in the perimeter wall. The symbols originated in areas and cultures throughout the Diaspora, reminding us of the complexity and diversity of African cultures. The term Diaspora describes the forced and deliberate transporting of Africans during the slave trade from their homeland, and dispersing them throughout the New World.

The 24-foot Ancestral Libation Chamber represents the soaring African spirit and the distance below the ground's surface where the ancestral remains were re-discovered. The Sankofa symbol is engraved on the exterior. Reminiscent of a ship's hold, the interior is a spiritual place for individual contemplation, reflection, and meditation.

The Ancestral Reinterment Ground is the final resting place for the 419 human remains unearthed in the early 1990s. They are reburied as close as possible to their original positions. The

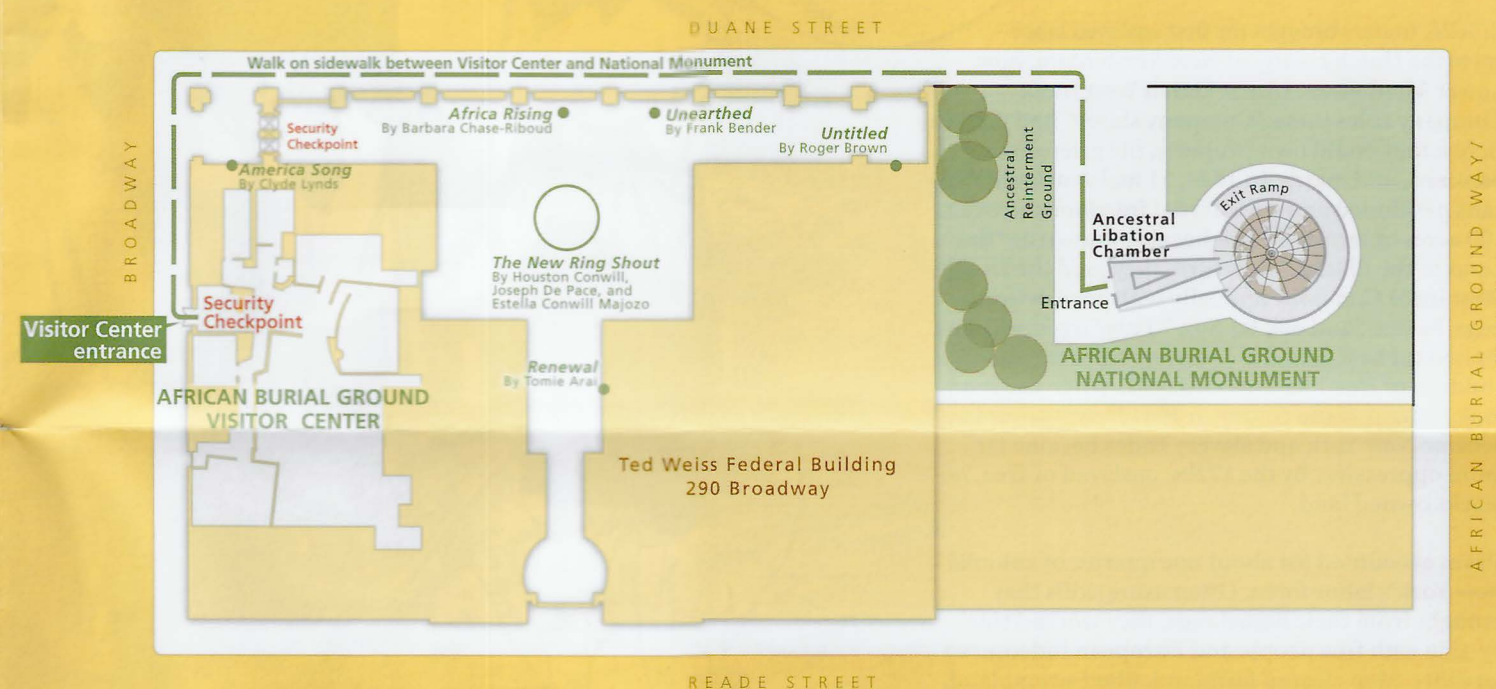
coffins were placed in seven crypts, and seven burial mounds mark the locations. Seven trees serve as guardians for the entrance to the Ancestral Chamber.

More Information
African Burial Ground National Monument is one of over 400 areas in the National Park System. To learn more visit www.nps.gov.

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Security and Safety

All visitors and their belongings are subject to strict security screening before entering the visitor center or the Ted Weiss Federal Building. • All weapons and dual-use, dangerous items are strictly prohibited. • If you have special needs or questions, contact the site before you visit.

The burial site is a sacred place. Please act respectfully and do not eat, drink, smoke, play loud music, or stand on the burial mounds. No loitering or soliciting in the memorial area. If you wish you may place flowers on the burial mounds.