

Buried Stories

Lessons from the African Burial Ground

In 1991, part of a very old cemetery was found at a building site in Manhattan. A few historians knew what it was: the African Burial Ground, where enslaved and free blacks were buried during the colonial period. Many people were very surprised, however. Some thought slavery did not exist here at all. Others thought there might have been a few slaves who worked on farms and were treated well. Most could not imagine huge numbers of slaves in New York City, living lives as hard as the enslaved people in the South. Most had no idea that New York City was a major slave-holding area for two centuries. They thought of New York as the place enslaved Africans escaped to for freedom and opportunity.

By law, when artifacts and remains are unearthed at a construction site, work has to stop so the area can be examined and important findings studied by historians and scientists. Some bones from the African Burial Ground were removed before construction work stopped, but over time, the remains of 419 people were found. There are many other graves under nearby buildings in lower Manhattan, perhaps 20,000 graves in all. No one had found the bones before because decades earlier nearby hills had been leveled and the soil deposited on top of the low-lying cemetery. The bones were only discovered in 1991 because the building under construction was a skyscraper, and the digging for the foundation had to go very deep.

The excavation was done by archeologists who numbered and photographed each grave. Then the remains were carefully lifted from the ground and sent to the W. Montague Cobb Anthropology Laboratory at Howard University. The research team was directed by Michael Blakey, an African American anthropologist. It included many different kinds of experts, as well as their top students. Most members of the team were African American.

The graves were at least 200 years old, so all that remained of the bodies was bones and teeth. Sometimes there were other items in the grave, and usually parts of a coffin were found. There were no headstones, so there was no way to know the person's name or date of death. The remains themselves had a story to tell, though, after they were studied and analyzed.

A Man [Burial 6]

He was 25 or 30 years old. Five buttons were found in his coffin. Two of the buttons are decorated with anchors, but the anchors do not match. Archeologists are not sure what the buttons mean. This man may have been in the British navy and been buried in a uniform. Or he may have found the buttons and sewn them on an ordinary jacket to dress it up or keep it closed against the weather.

He was laid in his grave with his head to the west, which was the custom in parts of Africa. One of his teeth had been filed on purpose, another African custom. A chemical study of his teeth showed he may have been born in Africa, and that he may have belonged to the Fulbe people of what is now Benin. Most of the 419 people whose remains were studied were born in West Africa.

He had arthritis in his arms, legs, and back, which would have made his joints swell and hurt. It came from lifting and carrying heavy loads, over and over. He may have carried some of those loads on his head, since the bones in his neck showed many small fractures. There were signs of infection and disease in his remains. He probably had rickets, a vitamin deficiency that makes bones soft and weak. He was also anemic from too little iron in his diet, which would have made him feel tired all the time. This man's ailments and injuries were common among the enslaved Africans in New York, and so was his early death.

A Woman and a Baby [Burial 335]

This woman, around 30 years old, was buried with a newborn baby cradled in her right arm. They may both have died in childbirth. The woman showed signs of infections and disease. Like most slaves, male and female, she had arthritis in her joints and spine from heavy lifting and hard work. Her teeth indicated that she was malnourished as a child, but it is not clear where she was raised. She was either born in West Africa, or descended from people who were.

Babies' bones are soft, so nothing much remained of the child's body, and nothing much could be learned. Scientists know, however, that many children were buried in the African Burial Ground. Children under two had the highest death rate among the enslaved people. The first six months of life were the most dangerous of all. Many, like this baby, did not survive. White children died young as well, but the extreme harshness of slave life put these mothers and babies at extra risk. This is one reason why New York's slave population did not increase naturally, and why the importing of slaves from Africa or the Caribbean continued throughout most of the period of slavery.

More Stories from the African Burial Ground

This man, woman, and baby represent some of the most common stories in the African Burial Ground. Other graves were more unusual. One woman [#340] was buried with a strand of 112 glass beads around her waist. Most were blue, but a few were yellow or gold, and one was black. There were some larger, more intricate beads, too. A few cowrie shells were threaded onto the strand with the beads. These shells were used as money in many parts in Africa, and were still valuable to this woman or her loved ones. Her age makes her special, too. Few enslaved women lived to middle age, but scientists believe this woman was between 39 and 64 when she died. This would have made her an old and perhaps respected member of New York's African community.

For most of the people in the African Burial Ground, there is no way to determine the cause of death. For one woman [#25] in her early 20s, the reason is all too clear. There is evidence of a blunt-force blow to her head. Her right arm was twisted and pulled until the bone broke. A musket ball, about half an inch round, was found beneath her ribs. She was probably shot in the back. The murder of slaves was not common, but this woman's remains provide vivid evidence that it happened.

One man [#101] around the age of 30 had filed teeth, following an African custom. His coffin was decorated with iron tacks in a heart-shaped pattern that may have been a Sankofa, a West African symbol. A chemical study of his teeth indicated he may have grown up in New York. Most of the people in the Burial Ground had been born in Africa, but Africa was important to all New York blacks, even if they had never seen it.

The Long History of the African Burial Ground

The first black New Yorkers were probably buried in the African Burial Ground around 1650, some 25 years after the first slaves arrived. At that time, New Amsterdam was still very small and concentrated at the tip of Manhattan. The blacks were given a spot for their cemetery that was far outside of town, in a low-lying area unsuited for farming. Over the next century and a half, the African Burial Ground grew to cover six acres of lower Manhattan. It stretched from Broadway to Centre Street, and from above Duane to below Chambers. During this time, the city of New York grew up around it. In 1794, the African Burial Ground ran out of space and was closed. Houses were built on the site almost immediately, then landfill was added from nearby hills, and more buildings went up. People forgot who was buried in the ground below until construction began on a sky-scraper almost 200 years after the last funeral was held.

Returning the Bones

After the scientists at Howard University finished their work, the remains began their trip back to New York City, in new coffins. Only small DNA samples were kept for later research.

The ceremonial journey stopped in five cities along the way, so that people in Washington D.C., Philadelphia, Baltimore, Wilmington, and Newark could pay their respects. Then the remains arrived by boat in New York City, at the same spot where slave ships had docked two centuries earlier. After days of rituals that included horse-drawn hearses, drummers in African kente cloth, singing, dancing, and prayers, the remains were returned to the earth in lower Manhattan.

It was a long and solemn occasion, but many people were joyful as well as sad. As Bernard L. Richardson, dean of the chapel at Howard University, had said earlier, “Even though we can’t call their names, we know them. We give thanks for the opportunity to connect with our past and our future. Oh God, you have made these bones live again.”