EXCAVATION
ANATOMY OF AN
New York's African Cemetery

ARCHAEOLOGY
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The bones of 420 enslaved Africans found last year under a parking lot two blocks north of New York’s City Hall comprise the largest and earliest collection of African-American remains, and possibly the largest and earliest collection of American colonial remains of any ethnic group. The excavation of the old Negroes Burial Ground has challenged the popular belief that there was no slavery in colonial New York, and has provided unparalleled data for the Howard University scholars who will study the remains of New York’s first African Americans. But as archaeologists removed the remains one by one, they dug up age-old resentment and suspicion with every trowel-full of earth. Scholarly excitement was tempered by the protest of the city’s black community, which felt its concerns were not being addressed in decisions about the excavation and disposition of the remains. In the flurry of protests, negotiations, and political maneuverings, the controversy took on an undeniably racial cast. The African Burial Ground, as it is known today, became a “microcosm of the issues of racism and economic exploitation confronting New York City,” says Michael L. Blakey, a Howard University anthropologist and the burial ground’s scientific director.

In a national context, the controversy over the burial ground excavation became an important episode in a larger struggle of descendant communities to reclaim their heritage. But more specifically, the story was about African-American empowerment: about how a black congressman, acting on the advice of New York City’s first black mayor, stopped the excavation of the burial ground; about how the African-American community chose Washington D.C.’s Howard University, the country’s most prestigious black research university, as a venue for the study of the remains, thereby ensuring that black researchers and students would study and interpret the remains of their ancestors; and about how the city’s black community lobbied for and received a $3 million appropriation from Congress for a memorial and commemorative museum. Equally important were the hard lessons learned by the General Services Administration, the federal agency that supervised the excavation—lessons about the importance of descendant-community involvement in salvage archaeology.

The story of the African Burial Ground begins in 1626, when the Dutch West Indies Company imported its first shipment of slaves, 11 young men from today’s Congo-Angola region of Africa. Two years later, the company brought over three African women “for the comfort of the company’s Negro men,” according to Dutch West Indies records. Like the British who governed Manhattan after them, the Dutch encountered difficulties attracting European settlers to the new colony. Grave manpower shortages threatened the profitability of the Dutch West Indies trading enterprise, and the company was quick to import slave labor to farm its fields. In 1664, just before the Dutch ceded Manhattan to the British, enslaved Africans made up about 40 percent of the colony’s total population. The British continued the slave trade, importing as many as 6,800 Africans between 1700 and 1774, many of whom had worked previously on Caribbean plantations. By the mid-eighteenth century, New York had become a thriving port town, and enslaved Africans loaded and unloaded cargo at the docks, wharves, slips, and warehouses along the East River. They also piloted boats ferrying produce from the farming villages of Long Island, repaired and expanded city streets, and worked in shipbuilding and construction. On the eve of the American Revolution, New York City had the largest number of enslaved Africans of any English colonial settlement except Charleston, South Carolina, and it had the highest proportion of slaves to Europeans of any northern settlement. Though seldom acknowledged, Africans were essential to the functioning, as well as the building of colonial New York.

In November 1697, New York City adopted a policy of mortuary apartheid, declaring lower Manhattan churchyards off-limits to blacks. Forced to look for a place to bury its dead, New York’s African population, which then numbered about 700, chose unappropriated property outside city limits two blocks north of today’s City Hall. There, from 1712 until 1790, in an area characterized by David Valentine, an early city historian, as “unattractive and desolate,” Africans conducted last rites for their people. “So little seems to have been thought of the race that not even a dedication of their burial place was made by church authorities,” wrote Valentine of what was known then as the Negros Burial Ground. Under the British, Africans were subject to a sunset curfew and city ordinances that prohibited unsupervised gatherings of more than three slaves. They were, however, allowed to gather in large numbers and with regularity at the burial ground. Some 10,000 to 20,000 people, both
black and lower-class white, are believed to have been buried in the five-to-six-acre plot of land.

The growth of the city’s population in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries led to a northward expansion along main thoroughfares such as Broadway. Street plans were drafted, and blocks over the burial ground were divided into lots for residential and commercial development. By the end of the century, ten- and 15-story buildings with deep foundations and with vaults that were used for storage and coal delivery were going up. The Negros Burial Ground, now paved or built over, was all but forgotten, noted only in a few historical maps and documents. Meanwhile, African Americans were burying their dead on the Lower East Side, near what are now Chrystie and Delancey streets.

Nearly 200 years later a section of the burial ground lay beneath a parking lot between Duane and Reade streets. In December 1990, New York sold this property and another plot on nearby Foley Square to the General Services Administration (GSA), the federal agency charged with constructing and managing government buildings. The GSA paid $104 million for both properties, which it hoped to develop simultaneously. It planned to build a $276 million, 34-story office tower and adjoining four-story pavilion on the parking lot area. A federal courthouse was envisioned for the Foley Square property. The tower, designated 290 Broadway, would contain the offices of the United States Attorney, a regional office of the Environmental Protection Agency, and the downtown district office of the Internal Revenue Service. The pavilion would house a day-care center, an auditorium, and a pedestrian galleria.

Five months before the GSA bought the sites from the city, the agency hired Historic Conservation and Interpretation (HCI), an archaeological salvage and consulting firm, to write the archaeological portion of an environmental impact statement for the 290 Broadway site. Such statements are a legal requirement before any new construction using federal funds can begin. HCI’s report identified the area as a section of the old Negros Burial Ground and included historical maps indicating its approximate location. But the impact statement predicted that nineteenth- and twentieth-century construction at the site would have destroyed any significant archaeological deposits. It read in part: “The construction of deep sub-basements would have obliterated any remains within the lots that fall within the historic bounds of the cemetery.”

Still, the statement left open the possibility of some human remains being preserved under an old alley that once bisected Duane and Reade streets. That the GSA purchased the land despite this possibility suggests that the agency was betting on HCI’s overall assessment that few, if any, human remains would be found there. In retrospect, GSA regional director William Diamond admits that the agency would never have bought the land if it had known it would have to remove hundreds of skeletons before sinking the office tower foundation.

In May 1991, six months after purchasing the land, the GSA hired HCI to investigate the possibility that there were undisturbed burials in the alley area. By the end of the summer the firm started to find human bones. In September a full-scale excavation was underway, and on October 8 Diamond held a press conference to announce the discovery of the remains. One year later, the last of some 420 skeletons had been removed from the site to Lehman College in the Bronx, where they were undergoing conservation before being transferred to Howard University for more detailed study.
In a private ceremony at the Fatimahta Adenike, a Yoruba priestess, and Hru Akish, a Kenyan priest, recent a West African burial custom symbolizing the continuation of life. According to the custom, a newborn child is passed back and forth over the grave of a deceased person.
African-American outrage over the handling of the excavation stemmed from a perception that the black community had no control over the fate of its heritage—that decisions about the burial ground were being made by white bureaucrats with little insight into African-American history and spiritual sensitivities. “Religious, Afrocentric people believe that to disturb burials in any way is the highest form of disrespect,” says Gina Stahlnecker, an aide to State Senator David Patterson, who represents Harlem and the Upper West Side. “There were some people who believed the archaeologists were releasing evil.” According to Peggy King Jorde, of the Mayor’s Office of Construction, an early monitor of the project, the GSA initially was calling the site a “potters’ field,” which she felt divorced it from its African origin and diminished its importance. There were even rumors, she says, that the bones were to be removed without any archaeological study. Jorde says that the GSA had only vague ideas about what to do with the remains that were coming to light.

The black community was also upset because it was not alerted at the outset to what might lie beneath the parking lot between Duane and Reade streets. While the GSA did distribute both draft and final environmental impact statements to more than 200 federal, state, and city agencies and local community groups, the agency did not alert civic groups in predominantly black neighborhoods that the buildings would be constructed on top of the old burial ground. “I spoke to hundreds and hundreds of people in the black community, and no one had ever heard about it,” says Stahlnecker. While distributing environmental impact statements to descendant communities may seem like a good idea, it is not customary for private or government developers to do so. Peter Sneed, the GSA’s planning staff director, argues that the distribution list was formulated in accordance with federal regulations. “We didn’t include the Harlem community board because the project isn’t in Harlem, it’s in lower Manhattan,” he says. “We felt it was incumbent upon the Mayor’s office to spread the word. It’s unreasonable to expect a federal agency to know every interest group in the community.”

African-American fury over the excavation increased dramatically after a backhoe operator digging the tower’s foundation accidentally destroyed several of the burials. The incident was reported by Dan Pagano, an archaeologist for the city’s Landmarks Preservation Commission, who was photographing the site through a telephoto lens when he spotted HCI archaeologists sifting through human remains outside the excavation area, where the backhoe had scooped up earth so that a concrete footing could be poured for the tower. Pagano says jawbones and leg and arm bones were among the remains scooped up by the backhoe. The GSA blamed the accident on an out-of-date drawing that the construction crews were using to determine which part of the site was “culturally sterile.”
Diamond halted tower construction pending further investigation by archaeologists. The incident led State Senator David Patterson to form an oversight committee to monitor the burial ground excavation.

Miriam Francis, a member of Patterson's committee, says that the involvement of African-American anthropologists in the excavation was among the group's most pressing concerns. "If it was an African find, we wanted to make sure that it was interpreted from an African point of view," she says. But the committee soon learned that the GSA had picked physical anthropologists from the city's Metropolitan Forensic Anthropology Team (MFAT) to conduct field analyses of the remains and that the bones would be stored at the group's Lehman College facility. "We didn't know anything about MFAT; whether they were butchers, bakers, or candlestick makers," says Francis. She notes that when the committee introduced the GSA to African-American specialists like Howard University's Michael Blakey, it was either stonewalled or ignored.

Meanwhile, the GSA was having difficulty getting HCI, its archaeological salvage contractor, to produce a research design stating conservation measures and scientific study goals for the burial project. The GSA had managed to obtain extensions on the report's due date from the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, the government agency that reviews all federal projects that might have an impact on historic sites. Still, the missing research plan sent further signals to the black community that something was wrong with the way work was progressing. "Any archaeological excavation is useless without a research design," noted Landmarks Preservation Commission Chair Laurie Beckelman at a congressional hearing on the burial ground. "It's like driving a car in a foreign country without a road map or destination."

HCI's Edward Rutsch, the project's archaeologist, says that although he was responsible for the research design, he felt too overworked to get it done properly. "They [GSA] had us working seven days a week and overtime every day," says Rutsch. "Many times it was expressed to me that millions of dollars of public money were being lost. There was terrific pressure to get the excavation done—to finish it."

Last April, black activists staged a one-day blockade of the site in an effort to prevent the GSA from pouring concrete for the tower's foundation. Among other things, they were concerned that there was little African-American involvement in the scientific aspects of the excavation; they were visibly unhappy at the choice of Lehman College as the site for the conservation of the remains. Bones from the site had been wrapped in newspaper and placed in cardboard boxes before being shipped to Lehman. One problem, according to Dan Baer of Edwards and Kelcey, an engineering firm hired to manage the site, was that "We were
digging them out faster than [storage] cases could be made.” But in the African-American community there was concern that the bones were being damaged at Lehman. “They had some remains up there in boxes ten or 11 months,” says Abd-Allah Adesanya, director of the Mayor’s Office of African American and Caribbean Affairs. “They were wrapped in newspaper longer than they should have been. They had to be rewrapped in acid-free paper.” Baer says, “The bones were stored in newspaper, which may be scientific protocol, but it didn’t appear respectful to those who visited the site. It was a mistake that was made. But the bones were in good shape and Dr. Blakey said so after touring the facility.”

Blakey’s tour of Lehman resulted from pressure by Senator Patterson’s committee. “We kept asking them [MFAT], ‘Can we go up there?’ And that involved more waiting, more delays,” says Miriam Francis. “It wasn’t that we were against Lehman, we just wanted to see how our ancestors were being stored.” Blakey’s visit to the facility confirmed the community’s suspicion of inadequate conservation. In a letter to Archaeology, Blakey wrote “We intervened in time to prevent the potential for further deterioration, such as the spread of mold in the skeletal remains due to inadequate environmental controls, and improper storage of skeletal materials on top of fragile bone.”

As the excavation progressed, the GSA began briefing the public on the burial project’s progress. But there was a widespread perception among African Americans that the GSA was merely paying lip-service to the public, that they were digging the bones as fast as they could so the tower foundation could be poured. “People would tell them [the GSA] their gripes, then they went off and did what they wanted,” says Adesanya. “The community wanted to be let in on the decision-making process, to influence the direction of the project.” While descendant-community input into decisions about the course of contract excavations seems desirable when human remains are involved, consultation is not part of standard archaeological practice. Nonetheless “the [African-American] community was very unhappy,” says Diamond, “and I understood that and kept saying to them, ‘I wish I could help you with this but my obligations by law are contrary to your wishes, and the only way we can get this changed is by an act of Congress or an agreement from the administrator of the GSA.’ And I was in consultation with them [GSA administrator Richard G. Austin and members of Congress] and they were telling me to continue the construction.”

At the GSA’s public meetings, African Americans also questioned the propriety of continuing with the removal of remains from the area where the pavilion would be built. They also hoped that the GSA would consider not building the pavilion, or at least modify the plans so there would be no further removals. “There were several conflicting demands,” recalls Diamond. “Some wanted the exhumation to stop, others wanted nothing built on the site, and still others wanted a mu-

A speaker opposed to the burial ground excavation makes his case during a public meeting at New York’s Trinity Church.

City archaeologist Dan Pagano, right, and Howard University’s Michael L. Blakey, to Pagano’s right, were panelists at a public presentation on the excavation.

Former Congressman Gus Savage tours the burial ground before calling a halt to the excavations in July 1992.

seum built on the site.... But I had no authority but to continue under the law with the construction.”

The GSA eventually replaced Historic Conservation and Interpretation with John Milner Associates (JMA), a West Chester, Pennsylvania, archaeological contractor. JMA had recently completed a successful excavation of an early nineteenth-century cemetery associated with the First African Baptist Church in Philadelphia that brought to light information on that city’s early black history. “JMA had done this sort of job before,” says Baer. “We didn’t feel we had involved the community enough and we thought that JMA would improve that situation.”

But reports by agencies monitoring the excavation were becoming increasingly critical. One report filed
by the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation stated, in part, that: "...the GSA was proceeding without any clear focus on why the remains were being removed; how they were to be analyzed; how many more bodies were involved; or, what the African-American community's desire was for the treatment of the burials." Mayor David Dinkins sent a letter to Diamond complaining about the lack of a research design and requesting "that the GSA suspend all excavation and construction activities in the pavilion area and bring the project into compliance with the terms outlined in the Memorandum of Agreement [a document specifying the terms of archaeological work to be undertaken in advance of construction]..." There is "no basis for discontinuance of ongoing excavations" was Diamond's response a week later. "I would not be in a position of abrogating important government contracts because of political pressure," he later recalled.

The final act in the drama was played out before the congressional committee that appropriates funds for the GSA, the House Subcommittee on Public Buildings and Grounds. Meeting in New York, the subcommittee was chaired by former Representative Gus Savage, an Illinois Democrat, who heard testimony from the GSA, the Advisory Council, the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission, and concerned citizens. At the meeting, the GSA argued that stopping the excavation would jeopardize the exposed human remains, and it estimated that relinquishing the pavilion site would cost taxpayers as much as $40 million: $5 million in interest payments, $10 million in land acquisition costs, and $25 million in initial construction costs.

Savage then subjected GSA representatives to intense questioning, during which it became apparent that at the outset the GSA was aware that a historic burial ground had once occupied the land it intended to purchase and develop, and that the agency had made no contingency plans for construction in the event that human remains were found. The meeting also revealed that the building prospectus for 290 Broadway the GSA had submitted for Congressional approval did not mention the burial ground, nor was Savage's subcommittee alerted by the agency when HCI's impact statement mentioned the possibility of intact graves. Savage ended the hearing early, noting that he would not approve any further GSA projects until he received "a more honest and respectful response" from the agency regarding its excavation of the burial ground. "And don't waste your time asking this subcommittee for anything else as long as I'm chairman, unless you can figure out a way to go around me! I am not going to be part of your disrespect," Savage said.

Three days later, Savage halted excavation on the pavilion site, and last October former President Bush signed Public Law 102-393, ordering the GSA to cease construction of the pavilion portion of the project and approving $3 million for the construction of a museum honoring the contribution of African Americans to colonial New York City. Meanwhile, JMA removed the

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**Stories the Bones will Tell**

The skeletal remains and associated artifacts from the African Burial Ground are the only concrete evidence recovered to date of the life of Africans who lived in colonial New York City. The burials were found 16 to 28 feet below street level, many coffins stacked one on top of another—an urban mortuary practice of the period. Although the majority of burials are people of African descent, about seven percent appear to be Europeans. Physical anthropologists determine racial differences by studying characteristic features of the skull, pelvis, and limb bones. The 420 skeletons found at the New York City site represent a fraction of the entire graveyard population. The condition of the remains varies considerably, from good to extremely poor. There were no grave markers or burial maps, and other than wood, coffin nails, and shroud pins, few artifacts associated with the burials were found. "These were not wealthy graves," says Howard University's Michael L. Blakey, the African Burial Ground's scientific director. "The most striking artifacts were the glass beadwork on one woman, and cowrie shells," he says. "Cowrie shells had a symbolic function in West African funeral practice. They were symbols of the passage in death across the sea and have been variously interpreted as a return to Africa or the afterlife."

In the vast majority of the burials the deceased's head faces west, which prompted journalists to report that the bodies were arranged according to Christian burial practice so that they could sit up and see the rising sun on Judgment Day. But Blakey warns that there was considerable overlap between African and Western burial practices during this period, and it is unclear just how Christianized the Africans were. Blakey points out that a few graves facing east may indicate Moslem burials.

Spencer Turkel, an anthropologist with the Metropolitan Forensic Anthropology Team, estimates two-thirds of the remains found at the site were male, and that 40 percent of the sample were children. He says that sex ratios may change after lab study because
the hard physical labor demanded by slavery affected the musculoskeletal structure in such a way that some female skeletons look male. The soil in which the bodies were buried was highly acidic and corrosive to human bone, causing further complications for researchers. "One problem we've been having is trying to determine the difference between damage to the bone caused by life experience and that caused by post-mortem soil exposure," says Turkel.

He notes that field examination revealed some obvious causes of death—a musket ball lodged in a rib cage, and a case of rickets, a nutritional deficiency. Diagnosis of other causes of death will have to await further study. "The major epidemics of that period were cholera and yellow fever, but here we're dealing with vague written descriptions," he says. "Many of the children would have died from diarrhea, which is a form of malnutrition. Poorly nourished children would also have been susceptible to pneumonia."

Meanwhile, Howard University scientists are contemplating the skeletal sample's research potential. Because seventeenth- and eighteenth-century historical sources tend to dismiss or ignore New York's enslaved Africans, anthropological research becomes all the more important for scholars interpreting what their life was like. "This is a unique opportunity to gain a better understanding of the biology, health, and culture of the first generation of people who would become the African-American people," says Blakey.

The primary focus of the research conducted at Howard will be the social and economic conditions affecting the health of the enslaved Africans. The interdisciplinary team studying the skeletal population will consider questions dealing with demography, epidemiology, nutrition, social history, and cultural transformation. Demographic research will attempt to provide information on the African ethnicity of the sample. "We hope to bring attention to the great variety of cultural groups that were brought over from Africa," says Blakey. "Some of these individuals may have spent time in the West Indies or South America, and we may be able to pick that up," he says. Meanwhile, epidemiologists will study the Africans' adjustment to New York's disease environment. Turkel notes that such bone-scarring diseases as tuberculosis and syphilis were relatively rare in Africa, and finding them in this population would yield interesting data on the community's acculturation to Western diseases. Research on the skeletons may also reveal information about nutrition in the colonial period, while study of mortuary practices at the site may show the extent to which African burial traditions were retained or modified.

Because the sample is large enough to account for human variation, accurate statistical analysis will be possible. And because of the age of the burial population, the sample provides baseline data against which hypotheses about the development of specific pathologies in the African-American population can be tested, such as the relatively high incidence of hypertension in today's black community. The data will also yield information on toxic-element levels in pre-industrial America.

The draft research design submitted by Blakey this past fall notes that earlier studies of African-American skeletal populations tended to be descriptive of physical characteristics such as sex, age, and height rather than focused on biohistorical information such as diet, African nationality, and adaptation to disease. According to Blakey, carefully conceived, large-scale academic research plans for African-American archaeological sites are rare. "The growth of African-American archaeology reflects the randomness of the discoveries resulting from development projects," he says, adding that specialists in African-American archaeology often find themselves responding to "emergency situations," in which burial grounds or other sites are threatened by development projects. Theresa Singleton, an archaeologist at the Smithsonian Institution, says that "quick and dirty" salvage archaeology has compromised historical sites in general, and African-American sites in particular, because "you need time to study sites thoroughly, and most contractors don't have time." She adds that "many contract archaeologists don't know much about African-American archaeology." Blakey notes that contract archaeologists "have not often taken advantage of the rich literature and perspectives of Afro-American scholarship on Afro-Americans. That needs to change. And that's one of the things all the protest in New York brought about."—S.P.M.H.
last of the exposed burials.

In a statement to the House Subcommittee on Public Buildings and Grounds, GSA head Richard G. Austin acknowledged that “in hindsight we could have handled some things better.” Austin’s statement made it clear to all parties that the GSA recognized the need for descendant-community cooperation in salvage excavations. Its office tower would be built, but African Americans would determine the course of research on the remains. The agency hired Blakey to develop a research design, which he produced in consultation with JMA and numerous black scholars. Blakey was also appointed scientific director of a five-year research program on the remains that will take place at Howard University. Sherill D. Wilson, an urban anthropologist and ethnohistorian, calls the sudden involvement of black scholars “very revolutionary.” Such scholarship, she says, “is going to set a precedent for what happens to African burial grounds in the future, and how African heritage will be viewed by the public.”

Meanwhile, a chastened GSA has also set up a federal advisory committee chaired by Howard Dodson of New York’s Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture that will address plans for reburial of the remains, an African Burial Ground memorial, a burial ground exhibition in the office tower, and a museum of African and African-American History in New York City. State Senator David Patterson’s burial ground oversight committee seeks to create a museum that will honor African-American heritage, “a place similar to Ellis Island, something that can attest to Afro-American history.” The city Landmarks Preservation Commission has also proposed that the burial ground be designated a city landmark and has requested that it be considered for National Historic Landmark status. These efforts stemmed in part from a massive petition drive spearheaded by Senator Patterson’s oversight committee and jazz musician Noel Pointer that yielded more than 100,000 signatures. Among other things, the petition called for the creation of a museum and landmark status for the burial ground.

The burial ground controversy and its attendant publicity have had important repercussions nationwide. “The media exposure has created a larger, national audience for this type of research,” says Theresa Singleton, an archaeologist at the Smithsonian Institution who has done pioneering research on African-American sites. “I’ve been called by dozens of scholars and laypeople, all of them interested in African-American archaeology, all of them curious about why they don’t know more about the field. Until recently, even some black scholars considered African-American archaeology a waste of time. That’s changed now.”

Things have indeed changed. Public curiosity about this country’s African-American past has been aroused by the New York experience. And it is probably safe to assume that in the future government and private developers will take a hard look at how to include descendant communities in their salvage excavations, especially when human remains are concerned. “Everyone could have talked more to everyone else,” concludes the GSA’s planning staff director Peter Sneed. “There would have been a lot less heartache...the GSA has certainly been sensitized to archaeology.”

Dominic G. Diongson helped in the reporting of this article. Research assistance was provided by Andrew D. Reinhard.

A sign shows how the federal office tower will look when completed.

Archaeologists take a break outside their excavation tent.