

As always, we welcome reactions to these reviews and invite suggestions of exhibitions, historic sites, public monuments, reenactments, and other programs to include in these pages. Please contact:

Benjamin Filene  
 Department of History  
 University of North Carolina Greensboro  
 P.O. Box 26170  
 Greensboro, NC 27402  
 bpfilene@uncg.edu

Brian Horrigan  
 Minnesota Historical Society  
 345 W. Kellogg Blvd.  
 St. Paul, MN 55102  
 brian.horrigan@mnhs.org

The African Burial Ground National Monument. 290 Broadway, 1st Floor, New York, N.Y. <http://www.nps.gov/afbg/>.

Permanent memorial, opened Oct. 5, 2007. 14,520 sq. ft. Visitor learning center, opened Feb. 27, 2010. 6,700 sq. ft. National Park Service Staff, curators, and museum and memorial guides; Tara Morrison, superintendent; Cherie Butler, chief of interpretation, education, and cultural resources.

Nobel and Pulitzer Prize-winning author Toni Morrison remarked in 1988 that she had to write the novel *Beloved*, a mind-wrenching narrative of American slavery and slave resistance, because, “There is no place you or I can go, to think about or not think about, to summon the presences of, or recollect the absences of slaves. . . . There is no suitable memorial, or plaque, or wreath, or wall, or park, or skyscraper lobby. There’s no 300-foot tower, there’s no small bench by the road” (“A Bench by the Road,” *World: Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association*, Jan.–Feb. 1989). Twenty years later the African Burial Ground National Monument (ABGNM) stands as a public commemoration of the lives of Manhattan’s enslaved and free Africans. With three separate spaces constituting the site—an outdoor monument, a visitor center, and a permanent art exhibit on the first floor of a federal building—the ABGNM is perhaps the most prominent site in the United States dedicated to Africans and their American descendants. This review focuses on visitors’ experiences at the outdoor monument and learning center.

The ABGNM presents a breadth of historical material and offers a unique chance to engage with the politics and cultures that created it. The monument covers three main subjects: the history of slavery in New York from the colonial period to the state’s 1827 gradual emancipation law; the methodologies physical anthropologists and archaeologists use to analyze artifacts retrieved from the burial ground and the ways those processes yield important information about Manhattan’s Africans; and the political battles waged to ensure this history became memorialized and that the bones of dead Africans be given pride of place in Manhattan’s public space. The story of the late twentieth-century political and cultural activism that brought the ABGNM into existence is an integral part of the outdoor monument and the visitor center’s exhibit. And the influence of contemporary cultural and political predilections upon the site’s historical interpretations (which some derisively call presentism) is a palpable part of visitors’ intellectual and emotional experiences. Visitors leave with a deep sense of how different cultural, political, and intellectual interests can converge and sometimes collide, turning the creation of public history

sites into heavily politicized, controversial processes. Rather than hiding this reality, the ABGNM highlights it and demonstrates how African and African American cultural and political interests shaped the site's historical and spiritual character.

The ABGNM is essentially a cemetery, a graveyard, a commemoration of the dead erected by the living. Graveyards say just as much about the buried dead as they do about the living people who build and visit those sites: the memories of those who passed that the living choose to value and honor, and the classes of the deceased deemed worthy of having marked burials. Colonial Manhattan's sizable black population, a mixture of free and enslaved people, had its own cemetery in the mid-1600s. The land set aside for dead Africans probably grew after the public cemetery at Trinity Church banned blacks in 1697. Eighteenth-century documents, such as a 1754 English street planning survey of lower Manhattan, indicate an area on the northern outskirts of the city as the "Negros Burial Ground." Documents from the 1790s confirm that the cemetery stretched over six and a half acres. At the height of the practice of slavery in New York City, laws attempted to curtail black gatherings at funeral rites and burials, fearing that such gatherings could foment social disorder and slave rebellion. Over the centuries, as the city grew, this parcel of land for black burials gave way to urban development and was gradually covered by landfill, concrete, and asphalt. People seemed to forget about the burial site until 1989 when the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA) conducted research of an area in lower Manhattan where it planned to construct a new federal office building. Surveyors located eighteenth-century maps that indicated the African burial ground was exactly where the GSA wanted to build. When archaeologists excavated the site in 1991 they found human skeletons twenty-four feet below the street. What to do with those bones and how to memorialize long-forgotten dead Africans became an important cultural and historical matter.

The discovery did not halt the construction, however. GSA officials removed the bones and went ahead with their plans. Black political and cultural activists organized campaigns to stop the construction on what they considered sacred ground. One year later, after much public outcry, Congress ordered the GSA to stop construction on the site. In 1993 a team of scientists and scholars led by the Howard University archaeologist Michael Blakely formed the African Burial Ground Project to study and properly care for the remains. Project scientists excavated the contents of 419 graves and moved them to labs at Howard University. Meanwhile, in 1994 more than 150,000 people signed petitions calling for the creation of a public memorial at the burial ground. In 2005, after extensive debate and public input, the GSA and the National Park Service (NPS) selected the architect Rodney Leon's memorial design. In 2006, the year before Leon's design was completed, during a six-day celebration that attracted thousands of spectators in cities from Washington, D.C., to New York, the remains and artifacts from the 419 exhumed graves were returned to the burial ground, now designated an official national monument. The following year the outdoor monument opened under the administration of the NPS, and in 2010 the visitor center's exhibit space opened. It was the end of a twenty-year struggle by activists, scholars, and elected officials to ensure that the burial ground and the history of Africans and their descendents became permanent parts of lower Manhattan's public landscape. Those political battles and the historical interpretations activists fought to memorialize in the rediscovered burial ground are central parts of the ABGNM's overall aesthetic.

Visitors first experience the fruit of that struggle when they enter the African Burial Ground's outdoor monument. By design, the monument evokes a sense of the sacred. No walls or gates separate the monument from the street, but as they walk around, adult visitors grow noticeably quiet as they take in the memorial's subtle beauty and somber message. Children excitedly run around the memorial's lower chamber, touching and tracing the engraved symbols and icons with their fingers. Either response seems appropriate because Leon sought to create a space that was "a *living* memorial to the ancestors and their stories" (African Burial Ground press release, April 29, 2005).

Entering the memorial from the north, visitors look up at a twenty-foot wall emblazoned with the West African *sankofa*, a symbol associated with learning from the past. An epitaph reads, "For all those who were lost / For all those who were stolen / For all those who were left behind / For all those who were not forgotten." That large wall is one side of a triangular structure with an open roof and an entrance leading to a narrow "door of return" that takes visitors four feet down into a circular lower chamber. Memorial designers wanted visitors to feel as if they were on a ship reminiscent of the vessels that carried people from the African continent to the Americas. And whereas the "door of no return," a commonplace name given to departure points at West African slave transport castles, represents the end of the Middle Passage's barracoon stage, walking through the Burial Ground's "door of return" symbolizes visitors' connection to a serene space, a final resting place for people whose lives were shaped by arduous labor, harsh living conditions, and the disconnect from home that comes with living in diaspora.

The monument's lower level is a broad circular space, its walls adorned with carvings of religious and cultural symbols from Africa and the wider world. The distance from the floor of this space to the top of the gateway, roughly twenty-five feet, gives a sense of how deep beneath the street the remains were buried. As visitors explore the engraved icons and religious symbols they may contemplate the spiritual interconnectedness of people across time, space, and ethnic, racial, and religious identities. An engraving of the globe, with Africa at the center, covers the stone floor, along with physical descriptions and numbers the archeologists gave to the discovered gravesites: "Burial 284, man between twenty-two and twenty-eight years; burial 205, woman between eighteen and twenty years; burial 75, newborn or still born baby." Essentially, the monument is a public sarcophagus, inspiring visitors to feel that they have returned to a place of honor for Manhattan's Africans and their descendants.

Off to the side of the monument's entrance, before visitors come upon the "door of return," are seven mounds of grass under which are buried crypts, each containing sixty coffins. One of the 420 coffins contains offerings left by people at the excavation; the others hold the remains of the 419 individuals that archaeologists found buried at the site. The designers of the memorial wanted people to walk, to touch, to think, to develop a connection—mystical, intellectual, and certainly *felt*—to the spirit and history of those who centuries ago were buried in this ground.

While the memorial invites people to contemplate and even commune with the past, the learning center's exhibits allow visitors to use their visual, aural, and tactile senses to develop an understanding of how free and enslaved Africans in Manhattan lived and worked; how they preserved culture through burial practices; and how they maintained social bonds with one another. A twenty-minute introductory film entitled *Our Time at Last* describes the ways Africans in Manhattan worked, struggled, and resisted circum-

stances that stripped them of their culture and robbed them of their dignity. The film helps visitors understand that the very act of performing funeral rites was a declaration of Africans' humanity and community stability within a social system that increasingly sought—through law and sale—to deny them both. During the film's dramatic reenactment of colonial-era Manhattan's black funeral rites, scholars interject commentary on the nature of slavery in New York and in the Americas more generally. "Slavery was about work," one commentator states bluntly, describing the backbreaking labor many blacks performed in their daily lives as unfree laborers. Another scholar notes that "slaves" were synonymous with "colony builders," that "from Albany to Argentina" the history of colonialism in the Americas "is the story of African labor." In short, the film makes clear that the lives of Africans and their descendants in the Americas were characterized by work and death, and in between they struggled publicly and privately against a repressive social order to maintain personal dignity, stable familial ties, and intact communities.

Upon exiting the theater, visitors enter a circular room with exhibits and presentations on the walls, centered on a life-sized diorama of the film's burial scene. Visitors can stand with mannequins that look exactly like actors from the film; listen to call-and-response chants colonial blacks may have used in funeral rites; and look at plasma screen still-life depictions of the burial ground's bucolic surroundings. If the learning center is quiet, a visitor can feel like an actual participant in the funeral, experiencing the ways the burial ground was a significant communal space where free and enslaved Africans in colonial Manhattan could temporarily escape their lives as workers and be part of a family and a community.

On the perimeter of the space are images and texts on the nature of slavery in Manhattan. Several exhibits here describe how laws affected Africans in colonial New York; the types of intense physical work that enslaved and free African laborers performed in their daily lives; and the ways slaves resisted their subordination by running away, engaging in work slowdowns, or conspiring with other disaffected groups to destroy the city. There are graphic panels with timelines, lists of colonial laws directed at slaves and free Africans, facsimiles of runaway ads, descriptions of conspiracies that involved Africans, texts, and illustrations. One tactile exhibit designed to appeal to children and adolescents is a life-sized shipping barrel made to feel as if were filled with commodities or raw materials. The replica barrel is placed at the bottom of an inclined plank and fixed to the board in such a way that visitors can crouch down and try and push the barrel up the plank as colonial stevedores, many of whom were African and African American, would have done. "Imagine working on the docks, loading and unloading barrels all day," a caption reads.

Another section of the exhibit focuses on the ways archeologists marked the grave sites, studied the exhumed artifacts and skeletons, and analyzed the data to learn about black life in colonial Manhattan. A color-coded map shows exactly where archeologists found each of the 419 graves and whether the grave contained a man, a woman, or a child. Another wall-sized image shows sepia-toned pictures of all 419 archaeological digs where scientists found remains. The accompanying text tells visitors, "Approximately 15,000 people are buried in this ground. . . . If every burial were excavated this wall of photos would wrap the entire gallery." Other displays contain replicas of the items interred with the bodies. These exhibits discuss scientific breakthroughs archeologists and anthropologists experienced by studying the material culture and skeletal remains found in the grave site. Visitors learn how scientists use teeth and spinal bones to determine the

people's approximate ages when they died and the types of injuries and diseases they suffered throughout their lives—even the type of diet they consumed. But the curators seem to have been more interested in conveying a general sense of the history of slavery in New York and experiencing the cultural significance of African burial practices than sharing detailed knowledge of the forensic science behind the excavations.

The exhibit's planners also gave short shrift to the cultural, ethnic, and linguistic diversity that characterizes Africans, their societies, and their history. It is here that the pitfalls of the "presentism" that led to the creation of the ABGNM are revealed: the cultural imperatives that guided the call for a public commemoration at the burial ground traded complex interpretations of colonial-era African people for less nuanced depictions of the history of "Africans" in Manhattan. The learning center's only recognition of Africans' cultural diversity is a map of Africa that lists dozens of ethnic and linguistic group names along the continent's west coast and that tells visitors the captives taken to the Americas came from these groups. Exhibit designers did not indicate how Africans' cultural diversity and the historical processes of how "Africans" became "African Americans" influenced the development of black culture, even the cultural practices evident in funeral and burial rites. Activists' concerns that the African Burial monument "get the story right" largely sacrificed scholarly depth, complexity, and nuance for a historical presentation that paid homage to ancestors who were, literally, buried and erased from public consciousness. Presentist concerns to depict Africans' forgotten culture, humanity, and public space, however, overlooked the ways this public history site could teach visitors about the historical processes through which Africans and African Americans developed their cultural practices, the diverse nature of African identity in colonial Manhattan, and the numerous ways of life free and enslaved Africans and their descendants experienced. More attention to the ways scientists identified and analyzed "African" skeletons would also have enhanced visitors' experience and given laypeople a fascinating look into how scholars perform their work and bring it to the public.

No single memorial or exhibit can adequately represent the extensive history of Africans and their progeny in America. The ABGNM is nonetheless a place where people can intellectually and spiritually summon the presence of a nearly forgotten group of people who, centuries ago, lived and labored, buried their dead, and developed their cultures in ways that made the place where this national monument now stands one of the most significant cities on earth.

Brian Purnell  
*Bowdoin College*  
*Brunswick, Maine*

Montpelier, Orange, Va., <http://www.montpelier.org/>.

Permanent exhibition, restoration completed Sept. 17, 2008. 2,650 acres. Michael Quinn, executive director; Lynn Hastings, vice president for museum programs; Tom Chapman, research coordinator; Allison Deeds, director of curatorial operations; Sean T. O'Brien, executive director, Center for the Constitution; Matthew Reeves, director of the Archaeology Department.