



U.S. ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS DISTRICTS PARTNER ON AFRICAN BURIAL GROUND RESEARCH

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In September 2003, New York District Corps employee Victoria Gross quietly entered a large, cool room in the historic Hamilton U.S. Customs House and Museum in Lower Manhattan, New York City as if she were entering a church. The room was filled wall-to-wall with large crates. She gazed at them, knowing they were filled with the human remains from New York City's eighteenth-century African Burial Ground. About the same time, Angela Grimes, a St. Louis District Corps employee, sat down to watch the local news. She was awed by the broadcaster's report regarding a grand ceremony for the reburial of these remains.

Both employees were witnesses to one of the most important archaeological discoveries of the twentieth century. "As an American of African ancestry, it was a momentous occasion to be in the presence of where the remains and artifacts are being stored and to observe them being meticulously handled and examined by Corps' archaeologists from New York District and St. Louis District and Howard University," said Gross, who is the African American Special Emphasis Program Manager, New York District. "I knew about the burial ground, but until I saw the news report, I didn't know that [my organization] was leading this effort . . . ensuring the success of documenting the remains," said Angela Grimes, of the St. Louis District Information Management Office.

Discovering the African Burial Ground

The New York and St. Louis District Corps of Engineers were key players on the African Burial Ground Project, one of the General Services Administration's (GSA) priority projects. In 1991, the site was identified as the location of the burial ground through documentary research conducted by Historical Conservation and Interpretation, Inc. (HCI), under the direction of Edward S. Rutsch. Based on this research, field plans were developed and implemented to excavate test trenches at the site. It was during these excavations that the eighteenth-century African burial ground was unearthed.

The presence of an African burial ground in Lower Manhattan had been known through historic maps and was believed to have encompassed five to six acres of Lower Manhattan, or about five present-day city blocks, and to include up to 20,000 burials. However, historic city documents and GSA's own Environmental Impact Statement, conducted prior to the excavation, indicated that remnants of the burial ground at the planned construction site was unlikely because building construction during the 1800s would have removed what remained of the burial ground. Tests conducted by the archaeologists, however, revealed that portions of the burial ground were actually deeper beneath the ground surface than expected and apparently were unaffected by nineteenth-century development.



Figure 1: Customs House room filled wall to wall with crates of African Burial Ground remains.

The excavation of the new federal government building was halted and approximately 10,000 square feet of the burial ground was fenced off and protected. The excavation of a portion of the burial ground was initiated by HCI and completed by John Milner and Associates (JMA). They exhumed over 400 adult and child skeletal remains in partially decayed wooded coffins with scores of artifacts, including coins, shells, and beads. The human remains were found wearing shrouds fastened with brass straight pins and jewelry. The coffins were closely stacked in layers, going down as deep as 23 feet below street level.

Construction of the building eventually resumed and 290 Broadway was completed in 1994, leaving the remainder of the burial ground untouched. In 1993, the burial ground was declared a National Historic Landmark and GSA made plans to preserve it. The agency funded research to examine the findings in order to gain insight into the lives of eighteenth-century enslaved African Americans and made plans both to develop a memorial and public education center adjacent to the burial ground with the assistance of the National Park Service and to hold a reburial ceremony.

In 1993, GSA asked Howard University, based in Washington, D.C., to conduct scientific analysis of the human remains and artifacts before they could be reburied. The university brought the human remains to Howard University's Cobb Laboratory for examination and also established a lab in the World Trade Center's Building 6 to house and examine the artifacts. The artifacts were still being stored in the building when the World Trade Center was destroyed on September 11, 2001. Amazingly, many of the shelves holding the artifacts remained standing, and most of the artifacts were recovered by the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Involving the Corps

After September 11, GSA was in search of a suitable curation facility. Because of his exceptional reputation, the agency called upon Dr. Michael Trimble, Anthropologist and Director of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineer's (USACE) Mandatory Center of Expertise for the Curation and Management of Archaeological Collections (MCX-CMAC), at the Corps' St. Louis District. The center is the largest single organization in the Department of Defense dedicated to addressing the curation of archaeological collections on a national scale. "We work with other Corps districts and agencies on the preservation, storage, and management of archaeological and historical materials and associated documentation," said Trimble. Dr. Trimble worked with Howard University and GSA to set up an archaeological lab at the Hamilton U.S. Customs House and Museum in Lower Manhattan, New York City.

GSA also asked the Corps to be technical advisors on the project. Employing USACE's principles of virtual teaming, Dr. Trimble called upon the Corps' New York District for a set of "local eyes and ears." "For this to work efficiently, I needed someone in the area that knew the project," said Trimble. The project would call for numerous weekly and monthly meetings to ensure plans were being executed. Trimble felt this cost in travel and time would not be feasible for the Corps or GSA. "I was aware that Nancy Brighton, Lead Archaeologist with the New York District, had an intimate knowledge of New York archaeological sites," said Trimble. "Nancy's efforts were exceptional. She definitely became my right hand during this project."

Brighton was Dr. Trimble's principal assistant and local liaison. The two, along with many other personnel, worked as a virtual team for the last two years to ensure the project's success. "I acted as a technical project manager and provided local expertise and representation. I oversaw the work being conducted at the lab at the Customs House as well as made sure all of the project elements were being completed. This involved coordinating the ABG team meetings that included archaeologists from New Jersey and New York, GSA personnel based in Lower Manhattan, various regulatory agencies, members of the African American community, and other project stakeholders," said Brighton.

In Summer 2003, Dr. Trimble asked Brighton to go to Howard University with the St. Louis District Team to supervise the inventory of the human remains. "I supervised the Howard University advanced osteology students and the St. Louis osteologists as they confirmed that all of the remains removed from the burial ground were being returned for reburial," said Brighton. She added, "This process also confirmed that the data had been recorded by the Howard University scientists to allow them to prepare the skeletal biology, history, and archaeology reports. These reports had to be technically proficient and complete because the human remains and artifacts, after being examined, were going to be reburied. This data needed to be above reproach because it will be the only information available to use to analyze in the future."

The Reburial

During the summer, the Bronx Council for the Arts (BCA), working with the Corps and Howard Universi-



Figure 2: Archaeologist Christopher Ricciardi, New York District examines coffin pins and other small artifacts in Customs House lab.

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ty, was responsible for matching the human remains with the coffins that were specially manufactured in Ghana, Africa for this project. Each side of the coffin was intricately carved with traditional West African symbols and scenes. BCA wrapped each individual in linen before placing the individual in a coffin.

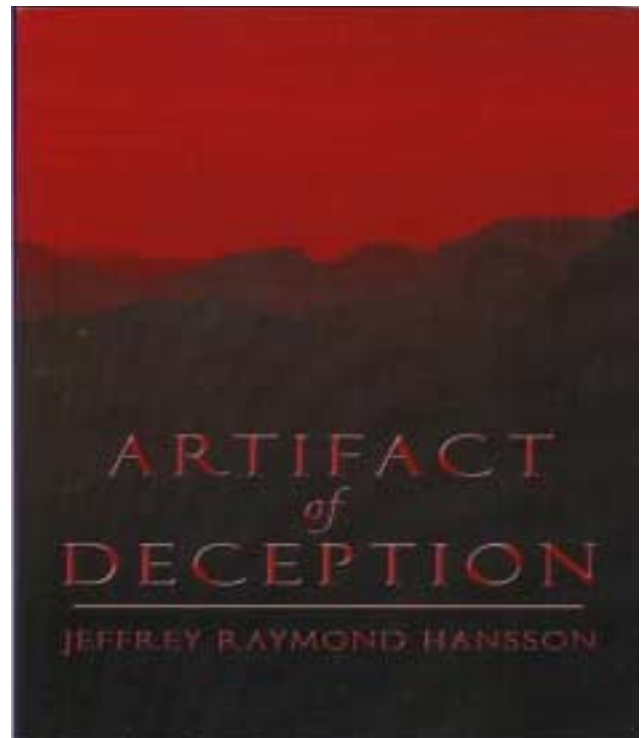
Before reburial could take place, some of the artifacts were photographed and replicated by artisans and conservators at the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, in cooperation with the National Park Service, for the Education Center GSA is planning to establish adjacent to the burial ground memorial. Archaeologists from the New York District prepared the artifacts found with each individual for placement in the appropriate coffin. The artifacts were carefully wrapped in tissue paper, which BCA then wrapped in linen and placed within each coffin. Also, placed with the bodies were "letters from the ancestors" written by members of the African American community.

The reburial ceremony was a three-day event, commencing at Howard University in Washington, D.C. and culminating in New York City. The "Rites of Ancestral Return" began on September 30, 2003 at Howard University. Four ceremonial coffins carrying the remains of an adult male, an adult female, and two children were transported to several cities on their journey back to New York City. Ceremonies took place at every stop, including Baltimore, Wilmington, Philadelphia, and Newark City. At Newark City, the coffins were transported to Jersey City where they were placed on a boat. On October 3, 2003, the boat carried them up the New York Harbor towards Lower Manhattan and Wall Street where the slaves originally entered New York City in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. From Wall Street, the four ceremonial coffins joined a procession with the rest of the coffins from the Customs House and all of them were carried by horse-drawn carriages to the burial ground. The coffins were then placed inside seven large African mahogany burial crypts also manufactured in Ghana, Africa, and a 20-hour vigil commenced. On October 4, the remains from the African Burial Ground were reburied.

Howard University is currently writing the historical, archaeological, and skeletal biological studies for the burial ground component of the site. JMA is completing the archaeological report for the nonburial ground (eighteenth-century potteries) portion of the site. ☐

SPECIAL ISSUE ON HERITAGE TOURISM COMING IN MAY

Heritage Tourism is the focus of the May 2005 thematic issue of *The SAA Archaeological Record*. Heritage tourism represents a significant force in the tourism industry in the Americas and worldwide, and archaeological resources are often an important component of the heritage tourist's experience. One of the biggest challenges facing these tourism programs is ensuring that the very resources that attract visitors are not destroyed or damaged in the process. A complicated undertaking, heritage tourism presents its own benefits, challenges, and opportunities to archaeologists. This series of articles will offer diverse perspectives on national and international heritage tourism programs and policies. The issue is almost full, but we are particularly interested in articles that cover Native American issues and those of for-profit organizations. If you would like to contribute an article or discuss an idea, please email or call co-editors Teresa L. Pinter (email: tpinter@acstempe.com; tel: [480] 894-5477) or Mary L. Kwas (email: mkwas@uark.edu; tel: [479] 575-6549).



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