

| African Burial Ground Project: paradigm for cooperation?

by Michael L. Blakey

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Among the refuse of the eighteenth-century origins of the Industrial Revolution, beneath 20 feet of nineteenth-century dirt, below the asphalt under our feet, 15,000 ancestors of African-America left their whole bodies to mark time for nearly 300 years. The discovery of this burial ground in downtown Manhattan materially confronted us with a decision: whether to realize our capacity to disregard these remains, sanctify them, or restore their stories to memory, whichever advocacy was the most powerful.

The city's African Burial Ground went unrecognized by New Yorkers for many decades. Distracted by national myths about 'freedom' in the northern cradle of America, a cemetery for Africans enslaved in New York was barely conceivable. When construction of a Federal building at 290 Broadway uncovered the remains, many who saw them thought, 'they must have been few', or 'they must have been free', or 'they must have been treated better' than the southern chattel that they were clearly not. African-Americans in every walk of life, grandmothers and grandchildren, legislators and inmates expressed a desire to know who these people were, wanting assurance that 'we' have human dignity in death.

The cultural resources and potential heritage value of the African Burial Ground were 'protected' under sections 106 and 110 of the 1966 National Historic Preservation Act. This legal protection could be considered adequate only because the law allowed for participatory democracy to fill the gaps left by its vague language. For the US General Services Administration (GSA), a large national government agency constructing a 34-storey office tower on the site, public input meant they were required to listen while acting unilaterally. For the increasingly concerned public, input meant that the GSA was obliged to do everything in its power to comply with the collective decisions of the public. The bureaucratic strategy was to plough forward with construction while holding required public meetings and expediting the archaeological excavation needed to mitigate the total destruction of cultural resources. The public strategy, consistent with the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement, was to organize mass public protests and to lobby legislators to end excavation and construction when meetings with the GSA were found to be without substance.

In 1991 and 1992, African-American activists won out against the GSA, despite (or partly because of)



18. Excavation of the African Burial Ground in New York City (1991-2).

the fact that the agency's bureaucratic arrogance had led it to violate both the legal requirements of public input and careful archaeological resource management (the archaeologists excavating human remains were working without an acceptable research plan). The relevant watchdog agencies for the proper implementation of the law in this case included the President's Advisory Council for Historic Preservation and the New York Landmarks Preservation Commission, comprising the State Historic Preservation Office and that of the State Archaeologist. While these sided with the public, their 'advisory' role seemed to leave them toothless without the kind of US Congress support that the activists were uniquely willing and able to rally. Had the new Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (or something like it) covered African-American sites and sacred objects there would have been less need for further activism. In the New York case, the African-American mayor of the city and the African-American congressman with oversight of GSA's budget, required GSA to immediately create a two-year Federal Advisory ('Steering') Committee that would recommend an end to excavation, a review of archaeological proposals, and the creation of

memorialization and interpretive programmes for the site. The GSA could build on the half of the site from which burials had been already removed, but given the weakened political position of the GSA relative to the public, they would be compelled to accept the Steering Committee's recommendations rather than simply mount a plaque on the building as they had initially thought sufficient.

In 1993, approval was given for the 419 human remains to be taken to the leading African-American research institution, Howard University, for study. Here, many African-Americans felt, the Eurocentric distortions and omissions of history might be averted. Ten years later, the 419 human remains were reinterred at the site after a six-city week-long ceremony named the Rites of Ancestral Return. Four years after that, the African Burial Ground was declared a US National Monument, alongside Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty, and brought under the auspices of the National Park Service. In 2010, an 8,000 square foot state-of-the-art Visitor Center and education space (which the GSA had initially sought to keep to a quarter of its final size) will open, with permanent exhibitions, related art and architectural components comprising most of the ground floor of the building built by GSA on part of the site.

Epistemology and ethics

Our Howard University research team became involved in the process in 1992 in response to the public request to better understand the archaeological significance of the site. From 1992 to 1994 the Steering Committee reviewed our research proposals and approved them. Our approach to bioarchaeology was unique, informed by both the African Diasporic tradition of activist scholarship (Drake, 1980), and dynamic new ideas about public engagement, refined in discussions, in which I participated, with indigenous peoples¹ and cultural anthropologists engaging with living people (Blakey *et al.*, 1994; Blakey 2001).

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From the beginning, our research team acknowledged the right of African-Americans to determine the disposition of their ancestral remains. This principle has not been commonly shared among our colleagues in archaeology and biological anthropology, except when forced by the 1990 NAGPRA law to comply with Native American's rights to determine the disposition of their ancestral remains and sacred objects. Given the callous treatment the newly empowered African-Americans, represented by the Steering Committee, had received from the GSA and its anthropological contractors, they were initially inclined toward an immediate reburial of remains without laboratory analysis. We accepted, fully, their right to do so while we assumed the professional responsibility to consult with them on the potential value of anthropological study of the remains. As I had begun to do with the Native American Rights Fund the year before NAGPRA was passed, our team expressed a desire to conduct research only with community approval – for which we had methods acceptable to them – and only with substantial community input on research questions of interest to them. Thus, unlike other kinds of 'top-down' archaeology, in which the public is informed of results, our process of engagement involved the public in the development of research design from the beginning to the end of the process.

Our ethical commitment to community control – a control that this community had already won – meant that they were not 'partners' in the way that some stakeholder relationships are viewed. We considered the community to be our client, justified by the ethical mandate to do no harm. We worked for our 'ethical client' and were no more partners with them than with the GSA. I think this distinction will ultimately make the difference in whether or not archaeologists and other professionals will do their best to be accountable to lay communities. The African-Americans who had persistently lobbied to protect the site needed a group-rights category such as the 'culturally affiliated group' moniker used in NAGPRA legislation. I began to use the term

'descendant community', which was found almost immediately to be both relevant and useful.

Anthropologists are required to be ethically responsive to many entities responsible for and potentially damaged by our research. The GSA was also a client to which we had responsibilities that we viewed as mainly financial and legal. As such, we termed it our 'business client'. Our research programme worked for, not with, both of these entities. Yet, where these clients interests conflicted, we privileged the 'ethical client', which in this case meant following principally the mandates of the Federal Steering Committee, whose very formulation conferred upon the ethical client much of the ultimate decision-making of our business client. Such a Committee can be very functional, if difficult, inasmuch as a descendant community should debate and resolve its own diverse views. We attempted to remain within the technical advisory role, noting earlier mistakes by anthropologists attempting to choose leaders or make decisions for culturally affiliated groups. Our commitment was to follow the informed research and memorialization decisions of the descendant community so long as these were not inconsistent with the defining principles of scholarship (an honest search for truth) and science (dependence on systematic material evidence).

Ultimately the research plan benefited from new and better questions than we could have devised without the descendant community. Their participation resolved the ethical dilemma of doing harm, because the group most affected decided for itself. The public buy-in that resulted from common ownership meant far broader interest in our work, and the establishment of an Office of Public Education and Interpretation for the Project, which shared our findings with the public through a newsletter, the outreach activities of its public educators and monthly special events. This collective commitment to the work of a broad public also meant continued public pressure on legislators to ensure that the GSA kept its



19. The Cobb Laboratory at Howard University, Washington DC.

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three academic volumes in 2009. The following summary of results is based on those published findings (Blakey and Rankin-Hill, 2009; Perry, Howson and Bianco, 2009; and Medford, 2009). Today, our data is available to everyone as part of the permanent exhibition on display at the Visitor Center of the African Burial Ground National Monument.

The story that unfolded in our laboratories was often, although not always, a surprising one. The first Africans were forcibly brought to New Amsterdam, the Dutch colonial predecessor of New York, in its second year, 1626. About 40 percent of people living in the trading town of New Amsterdam were enslaved Africans, some of whom had negotiated the right to partial freedom and land ownership by the time the British took the colony in 1664. Although there would be free blacks in English New York, they were probably no more than about 5 percent of a growing, mostly enslaved, African population in the mid-eighteenth century. We found the origins of the population to be unsurprising for the most part. Using historical documents, cultural artifacts and genetic information, we found that New York Africans came mainly from West and West Central African societies, with intensive importation from Madagascar in East Africa for a brief period. We discovered that lead, a chemical unique to material culture of colonial Europeans such as soldered pipes and pewter cups, was useful for tracing where these individual Africans were born. Levels of lead and other distinctive chemicals in the teeth can tell much about the birthplaces of adults and children. Those who died as children tended to be born in New York and had very high lead levels. Those who died as adults (and in the study sample the adults also had filed teeth) were usually African-born and had the lowest lead levels. The filing of teeth as a form of esthetic adornment is nearly exclusive to African-born people migrants to the Americas (Goodman *et al.*, 2009).

promises to financially support the entire agreed project (Blakey, 2008).

Research results

I was employed to organize and lead the research project, including the design and conduct of biological, archaeological and historical studies bearing on the 419 human skeletal remains interred in New York's eighteenth-century 'Burial Ground for Negroes'. The African-American people and the United States Government allowed these to be placed under the care of the W. Montague Cobb Biological Anthropology Laboratory at Howard University. More than 200 researchers, thirty specialists with doctoral degrees, nine laboratories and collaborating universities, twelve years and 6 million dollars were required to complete our work, leading to extensive online reports, published from 2004 to 2006, and

Developmental defects of childhood are more frequent for those born under American slavery than

for those born and raised in Africa. Nearly 5 per cent of skeletons showed evidence of a treponemal disease which we suspect is yaws, a tropical skin disease. Evidence of advanced syphilis, also a treponemal disease, but one that is first associated with European colonialism, is remarkably absent from the people buried in the African Burial Ground. In short, these findings are consistent with persons who had only recently encountered European enslavement and its harsher life in the temperate northern hemisphere.

Coffins were usually used to bury the dead, as they had begun to be used in West Africa, and people were enshrouded in white linen as was traditional. The orientation of coffins with the head to the west could not be distinguished as either Christian or non-Christian, and there is historical evidence of such diverse faiths among the African community on both sides of the Atlantic. These are some of our conclusions regarding the origins, arrival and transformations of eighteenth-century Africans in New York.

The imposition of English slave codes that had been honed in the Caribbean further stripped away their human rights. By the eighteenth-century, New York City had become a bustling trade centre in a burgeoning Atlantic world economy based on slavery. Wall Street was where the offices of the trade were housed, and where captured people were bought and sold through trade directly with Africa, and by importation from larger trading centres such as Barbados, Jamaica and Charleston. Grain, lumber, manufactured products, tobacco and many other goods produced by African labour in Long Island, Hudson Valley, Connecticut and New Jersey plantations were sold and shipped to England and the Caribbean from this port city (Medford, 2009). New York was a vital nexus in an economic network that depended on unpaid labour that, like later industrial and agricultural machinery, were the means of enormous wealth with which the Western world was built. Yet, these were not machines.

African societies could be tapped as a source of large numbers of captives, both of war and of the illicit village raids that American markets, greed and the chaos promoted by war encouraged. A seemingly unlimited supply of enslaved people and their dehumanized status in America helped minimize the costs of human chattel, in the process making people into a disposable commodity. The expediency of forcing persons to work at or even beyond their physical and psychological capacities brought benefits of productivity that were seen as exceeding costs to human life.

The demographic consequences of these evaluations are particularly evident in the costs of dehumanizing conditions to a woman's fertility and population growth. Decrease in fertility is usually thought to be the reason why plantation societies in the Caribbean and Louisiana did not demonstrate 'natural increase'. Population growth due to childbirths did not equal or exceed the numbers necessary to replace the previous generation.

A similar trend is found in New York, where colonial censuses show only 0.5–1.5 children per woman of reproductive age. At least two children are required to achieve replacement of the parents, and a greater number of births would have been required for natural increase to occur. The slow and steady population growth shown for Africans in New York was due to the continuous importation of adults and children, not to childbearing. Indeed, historical documents mention the preference of New York slaveholders for the purchase of children who are already weaned and ready to work. They discouraged reproduction of women isolated in white households where they worked and slept. African family formation was undermined by slaveholders, yet negotiated and struggled for by Africans even to the point of helping to prompt the Conspiracy of 1741, in which Africans were accused of torching the town. Indeed, if the deceased ancestors were viewed as part of the family, then the Doctors riots, which aimed at ending graverobbing at the end of the eighteenth

century, might also constitute African resistance to the destruction of family. We found the demography or structure of the population to be largely consistent with the Caribbean during the harshest period of slavery, when the open transatlantic trade and huge profits made from enslaved labour made human life cheap.

Our data also clearly demonstrate continued fecundity (the biological ability to become fertile) and fertility, but over one-third of the children buried in the African Burial Ground died within the first two years of life. Perhaps the Caribbean situation is different in that the small ratio of women/men should have further reduced fertility there.

Some scholars, furthermore, have commented on the ravages of syphilis as undermining fecundity in the Caribbean, African exposure to which began through sexual exploitation on and off the ships. Indeed, Africans called this the 'white man's disease'. In Surinam's Waterloo Plantation, Khudabux (1991) found definitive evidence of advanced syphilis (cloacae and stellate lesions) in about half of the fifty-four skeletons studied, while among our 419 from New York there is one skeleton with cloacae and none with stellate lesions. Furthermore, for much of the eighteenth century there were more African women in New York than African men, a manifestation of trade policies after the insurrections of 1712 and 1741 when the English sought to pacify the enslaved by reducing the importation of men and increasing that of women and children. These demographics of social control also brought about greater importation of women directly from Africa without an intermediate period in the Caribbean where they would have been 'seasoned' – held there for a while at some expense to the purchaser. These African women were also expected to do work that compensated for the lower number of men; work that along with their nutritional deficiencies indicated in the high frequency of anemia (porotic hyperostosis in 24 per cent of skeletons), also likely reduced their fecundity. Moreover, we see in New York a population that had fewer strikes against

its ability to reproduce than in the Caribbean. Yet they bore few children who lived beyond the age of 2 years.

African women often died early (15–25 years of age) in their reproductive years. The evidence of heavy work in the skeletons of men, women and older children is a clear indication of their being pushed towards the limits of human biomechanical capacity. When adding to this the utter disregard which European slaveholders extended to so-called 'superannuated' or elderly Africans, forced into the streets at the end of their lives, it does not seem unreasonable to conclude that slaveholders commonly saw blacks as labour only, and as disposable property. Bioarchaeology is the only means by which such mortality data could come to be known today. And it is bioarchaeological and historical research combined that presents us with the possibility of understanding the political and economic forces behind the mortality and fertility of these enslaved Africans.

Africans were more easily replaced during the open transatlantic trade than after its close in 1808. Subsequent 'breeding states' in the US (Virginia, Maryland, Carolinas, Georgia) showed trends towards greater protection for pregnant women and children in order to foster increased fertility of enslaved people for the purposes of domestic sale of their children. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, 10 percent of the people in the colonial town of New York were African. By the time of the War of Independence, 20 percent were African. These enslaved people built the town, grew its food, piloted its ferries, dug its mines, raised its children, made its materials, loaded and unloaded everything that reached its docks, sailed its ships, and were themselves property from which enormous profits were made in Europe and Euro-America. Many Africans helped the British hold New York as the last of its colonial strongholds during the Revolutionary War. Africans chose to fight for their own freedom on both sides of the conflict and the British were willing to trade emancipation for military

service against their local ‘masters’. Our comparisons with records of the main eighteenth-century Anglican church (Trinity Church) graveyard in New York City demonstrated that English colonial men and women were about eight times more likely to live past the age of 55 than the Africans they enslaved there.

Our skeletal data show that the high level of physical trauma in this population did not change significantly at around the time of the war, but archaeological investigation of the late, coffin-less burials suggests both family disruption and community cohesion.² At the end of the war, thousands of these emancipated Africans went to Nova Scotia under British auspices despite the protestations of the new US Government seeking their re-enslavement. Many of these Africans would eventually make their way back to Africa, to Sierra Leone. Some of those who stayed in the United States of America would live to see Emancipation Day in New York in 1827.

Today, the monument on Manhattan Island in New York City is not dedicated to its unknown African founders, but to people with an international history to be explored, debated and identified with at the Visitor Center. Not only is a story told of the past, but the intensive late twentieth-century struggle for human dignity of the people who refer to that past as ‘we’ has become an important part of the story. The government’s initial plan was to mount a plaque on the wall of their building and provide for a study of race differences in skeletal observations. African-Americans asserted their group rights, the right to know what happened during slavery, and the obligation of memorialization as a human right and a warning not to repeat the past. Archaeologists, biological anthropologists and historians are no more objective when they disregard these public goals than when they attend to them. In our case, we are certain many of the research questions were both different and better than those created exclusively among our specialist colleagues behind the walls of the academy. The claim that we

are objective by not attending to the expressed needs of the people most affected by the history we construct (descendant communities) simply constitutes serving the needs of others. What is the harm in a people’s self-definition and why should they tolerate other people’s interference in their efforts to tell their own story? In increasingly diverse cosmopolitan societies, the issue of group rights and heritage loom large. Recognition of intrinsic human subjectivity in the production of knowledge requires one to be ethical in ways that concur with the consistent use of scientific method yet go beyond it. Democratization of knowledge that accommodates the diverse perspectives of plural states is both an ethical and epistemic process. We offer a paradigm, not limited to African-Americans or cemetery sites, of cooperation that frees voices to be more fully heard in healthy, if difficult, conversations about how, why and what ‘we’ have come to be.

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| NOTES

1. The World Archaeological Congress of 1986 and the Inter-Congress of 1989, for example.

2. Perry, Howson and Bianco (2009) show that these burials, north of the burial ground fence-line post holes, were buried carefully, although by non-family members.