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A Burial Ground and Its Dead Are Given Life

By Edward Rothstein

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<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/26/arts/design/26burial.html>
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Cemeteries are at least as much for the living as the dead. They are the locus of tribute and memory; they affirm connections to a place and its past.

So in 1991, when during construction of a General Services Administration office building in Lower Manhattan, graves were discovered 24 feet below ground, and when those remains led to the discovery of hundreds of other bodies in the same area, and when it was determined that these were black New Yorkers interred in what a 1755 map calls the "Negros Burial Ground," the earth seemed to shake from more than just machinery. The evidence created a conceptual quake, transforming how New York history is understood and how black New Yorkers connect to their past.



That is a reason why Saturday's opening of the African Burial Ground Visitor Center, near where these remains were reinterred, is so important. Among the scars left by the heritage of slavery, one of the greatest is an absence: where are the memorials, cemeteries, architectural structures or sturdy sanctuaries that typically provide the ground for a people's memory?

The discovery of this cemetery some two centuries after it was last used provided just such a foundation, disclosing not just a few beads, pins and buttons, but offering the first large-scale traces of black American experience in this region. Here, underneath today's commercial bustle, are tracts of land that for more than a century were relegated to the burial of the city's slaves and free blacks.

In all 419 bodies were discovered -- giving a clue to how many others still lie under the foundations of Lower Manhattan. (Estimates have ranged from 10,000 to 20,000.)

The new visitor center, inside the federal building that was ultimately constructed over a portion of the excavation (the other part became a burial site and memorial), is meant to explain the site's significance -- not a simple task, because the passions stirred by the discovery were not just historical, but also personal. There was a felt connection to the people, unearthed in their disintegrating coffins, who in the early decades of the city's settlement were often forced into its construction. A sacral regard for the dead was joined with a sense of identification and continuity.



The centerpiece of the new visitor center exhibits is a life-size tableau of a burial ceremony. Photograph by Chester Higgins Jr., New York Times.

The months after the discovery only amplified those passions. While the city has paved over a multitude of cemeteries in its hectic past, here the government's initial intention to exhume and preserve the remains while proceeding with its nearly \$300 million construction project was sadly inadequate. Protests and political interventions led to the suspension of building and the revision of plans.

In 1993 the burial ground was placed on the National Register of Historic Places; in 2006 the memorial site was declared a national monument and placed under the oversight of the National Park Service. In 2007 a memorial sculptured by Rodney Leon was unveiled, and now the site's \$4.4 million visitor center means to place it all in context.

To do this the center's exhibition (created by Amaze Design) combines a sense of communal rededication with a sense of historical enterprise that followed the 1991 discovery. A revision in popular understanding has taken place about slavery's history in New York City, evident in several recent books and an impressive series of shows at the New-York Historical Society. In the 18th century slaves may have constituted a quarter of the New York work force, making this city one of the colonies' largest slave-holding urban centers.

For seven years scholars at Howard University, led by the anthropologist Michael L. Blakey, also examined every bone fragment and relic found at the site before they were ceremonially reinterred in 2003 at a memorial next to the slightly shrunken footprint of the new building. The scholarly reports, alluded to in some of the displays, show injuries to bones attributed to strenuous physical labor, signs of malnutrition and some physical indications (like filed teeth) of an African heritage.

These various themes do not always accompany one another felicitously in the exhibition; in fact the passion and the detached historical analysis often seem to trip over each other, but the overall impact is considerable. The visitor center also includes an introductory film, a shop and classroom space. [Read the full article in the New York Times >>>].