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Nameless Are Memorialized at Old African Burial Site

By Elias E. Lopez

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Sixteen years after the remains of more than 400 enslaved and free Africans were unearthed in Lower Manhattan, a new monument will open to the public on Friday to honor a place once called the Negroes Burial Ground.

The memorial, the African Burial Ground National Monument, designates the burial site of the remains, which were discovered in 1991 by workers excavating the foundation for the Ted Weiss Federal Building at 290 Broadway.
Commissioned by the federal government in 2005 at a cost of $5 million, the monument stands on a fraction of the 6.6 acres of burial ground where, according to historians and archaeologists, 15,000 to 20,000 people of African descent were laid to rest in the 17th and 18th centuries. It is the oldest and largest such burial site in North America, according to the National Park Service. Last year, President Bush proclaimed the site a national monument.

The monument will open to the public with a ceremony at 1 p.m. Friday, followed at 8 p.m. with a candelight procession from Battery Park to the monument at Duane and Elk Streets.

Rodney Léon, 38, a Brooklyn-born architect with the firm Aarris Architects of Manhattan, designed the monument, whose granite slabs rise in acute angles to enclose visitors in the hull-like Ancestral Chamber. An opening in the chamber, straddled by two reflecting pools, leads to a sunken circular court, where voices echo off of walls inscribed with symbols and scriptures.

Down a spiraling ramp is the Ancestral Libation Court, the centerpiece. A map of the world, centered on West Africa, is carved into the floor in gray and black granite, along with the archaeological notations made from the 1991 findings.

There also is a landscaped garden with seven mounds that mark the burial place of seven wooden crypts containing the remains.

"This is an important milestone in the whole memorialization process," said Howard Dodson, one of the early leaders in the development of the memorial and the chief of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture of the New York Public Library. "The ancestors are being treated with dignity, and the monument is part of asserting their humanity and their contribution to this city."

Engraved on the main granite wall are the words: "For all those who were lost/ For all those who were stolen/ For all those who were left behind/ For all those who are not forgotten."