



Discover the African Burial Ground National Monument: A Lightning Lesson from Teaching with Historic Places



Credit: National Park Service photographs. Overlay map courtesy Library of Congress.

African enslavement played a key role in building European colonial settlements during the 17th and 18th centuries. Dutch traders laid the foundations for the place now known as New York in 1626. They enslaved Africans for manual labor in New Amsterdam, now New York. The enslaved population grew when Great Britain took control of the colony in 1664. By the time of the American Revolution, the New York region contained the largest concentration of African and African-descendant populations in the northern colonies.

For over 200 years, a forgotten cemetery stayed hidden beneath layers of concrete in downtown Manhattan in New York City. But in 1991, archeologists uncovered the cemetery and found evidence of the lives and deaths of over 8,000 Africans and Americans of African descent. The skeletal remains of 419 individuals were exhumed, examined, and reburied at the site of discovery. Today, the cemetery site is the African Burial Ground National Monument. African Burial Ground today is the nation's earliest and largest known African American cemetery.



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About This Lesson

This lesson plan is based on the National Register for Historic Places nomination for the [African Burial Ground](http://npgallery.nps.gov/AssetDetail/NRIS/93001597) [http://npgallery.nps.gov/AssetDetail/NRIS/93001597] in New York City, New York. *Discover the African Burial Ground: A Lightning Lesson from Teaching with Historic Places* was published in 2017. It was written by Dr. Beth Pruitt, National Park Service contractor, and developed by Historical Anthropologist Maria Lee Strohmayer and NPS historian Katie Orr. Editing assistance came from Northeast Regional Office, National Parks of New York Harbor, and Cultural Resources Office of Interpretation and Education staff in D.C. This lesson is one in a series that brings historic places to students around the world.

Objectives

1. To explain how and why African cultures are present in American culture;
2. To describe the African Burial Ground National Monument and archeological evidence found at the site;
3. To identify the ways people memorialized the dead at the “Negros Buriel Ground” in colonial New York and the ways people memorialized the African Burial Ground National Monument.
4. Investigate, analyze, and report on one of three topics covered in an optional activity:
 - 1) Investigate the experiences of the Middle Passage in a global context;
 - 2) Commemorate personal heritage through poetry;
 - 3) Investigate local archeological evidence of spiritual practices.

Materials for students

1. Map of New York City in 1755 that shows the location of the “Negros Buriel Ground” (sic);
2. Secondary source reading about the origins, discovery, and memorialization of the African Burial Ground.
3. Primary source reading about the reburial of ancestral remains at the African Burial Ground during the “Rites of Ancestral Return”;
4. Photograph of the African Burial Ground National Monument.

About the Place

The African Burial Ground is in New York City, New York. The site is a National Historic Landmark and a National Park unit. The visitor center is at the Ted Weiss Federal Building, 290 Broadway, New York, NY 10007. Find visiting information at the African Burial Ground National Monument website [<https://www.nps.gov/afbg/planyourvisit/index.htm>].



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Where this lesson fits into the curriculum

Time Period: 17th and 18th Century Colonial Era, contemporary era.

Topics: This lesson could be used in middle and high school units relating to African-American history, European colonial history, and archeology.

Relevant United States History Standards for Grades 5-12

This lesson relates to the following National Standards for History from the UCLA National Center for History in the Schools:

US History Era 2

- Standard 3B: *The student understands economic life and the development of labor systems in the English colonies*
- Standard 3C: *The student understands African life under slavery.*

Relevant Curriculum Standards for Social Studies

This lesson relates to the following Curriculum Standards for Social Studies from the National Council for the Social Studies:

Theme I: Culture; Standards A-E

Theme II: Time, Continuity, and Change; Standards D-F

Theme III: People, Places, Environments; Standards A, C, G-I

Theme V: Individuals, Groups, & Institutions; Standards B, F,

Theme VI: Power, Authority, and Governance; Standard H

Theme VIII: Science, Technology, & Society; Standards A-C

Relevant Common Core Standards

This lesson relates to the following Common Core English and Language Arts Standards for History and Social Studies for middle and high school students:

Key Ideas and Details

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-12.1
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-12.2

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-12.7



Getting Started

How do Americans show respect for the bodies and memories of the deceased?

What historic place might you study to answer this question? Why?



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Locating the Site

Map 1: Plan of the City of New York, 1755.



Source: Library of Congress [<https://www.loc.gov/item/73691802>]

Caption for Map 1: Plan of the City of New York, 1755.

The City of New York was an important hub in the transatlantic slave trade. Thousands of enslaved people passed through here. Some stayed. Many were enslaved for life, but not all Africans in New York remained enslaved. A field west of the "Fresh Water" became "Negros Buriel Ground." Today it is Manhattan in New York City, a center for international trade.



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Questions for Map 1: Plan of the City of New York, 1755.

1) Identify the features labeled on the map. What did the colonists build or shape here? What features of physical geography (rivers, mountains, etc.) can you identify?

2) Locate the “Negros Buriel Ground” on the map. Who do you think was buried here? Who was not buried here?

3) In what ways do you think has New York City changed since 1755? How has it remained the same? Describe the physical changes you think have happened. Use evidence on the map and your prior knowledge to support your answer.



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Reading 1: “Rediscovering the African Burial Ground”

National Park Service

New York City in modern New York state is a crowded place. Instead of building out, city planners built up over the centuries. New streets and buildings are constructed on top of the old ones over the centuries since its founding. There is history beneath its surface. In 1991, archeologists uncovered a cemetery of thousands of enslaved people in the middle of Lower Manhattan. They knew there was something important there, but they did not know they were about to uncover the oldest and largest urban cemetery for enslaved people of African descent.

Dutch traders founded New Amsterdam, later called New York, in 1626. The Dutch used enslaved African labor to build it. One-third of the city’s population was African or African American. Slavery continued when Great Britain seized the city in 1664 and renamed it New York. Enslaved Africans chopped down trees, tilled soil into farmland, built roads, buildings, and walls – including the wall in “Wall Street”, a name for the famous business district in New York City today.

Africans and their American descendants could not bury loved ones in the other cemeteries in the city. In the late 1600s, city planners found a plot of land outside of city limits and created a segregated cemetery for enslaved residents. An estimated 15,000 to 20,000 men, women, and children were buried there in the 18th century as the population grew. The burial ground covered five city blocks when the cemetery closed in 1794.

City planners turned the cemetery into plots for houses a year after it closed. They created level ground for houses by flattening hills and filling in holes with dirt. They piled 25 feet of soil on top of the human remains at the site. The soil helped to preserve the bodies over the years, but it also erased the cemetery from view. It was hidden under sidewalks, roads, and buildings. The area became a part of the new street grid system for planning Manhattan in the 19th century.

The cemetery was invisible to the naked eye in the 20th century. The old “Negros Burial Ground” became the site of New York’s City Hall and courthouses. In the early 1990s, a federal agency wanted to construct an office building on the site. The National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 requires government construction projects to study the history of the place before they start building. So, archeologists examined the site and they discovered human remains from over 200 years ago.

Between 1991 and 1992, archeologists excavated the bodies of 419 individuals. Half of these were children under the age of 12. In 1999, they excavated nine more graves from under a sidewalk. The bones provided evidence about the health of the enslaved



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people in New York City, and the stress that slavery put on their bodies. Many were malnourished and died young.

The graves also provide evidence for different religious and cultural practices tied to many different African societies. For example, archeologists identified glass beads, white shells, coins over eye sockets, and copper pins. In the Bakongo African tribe, white seashells symbolized immortality and water and allowed human spirits to stay afloat after death. Other tribes may have had other meanings for the same object.

The different cultures represented at the burial ground shared similar beliefs in an afterlife. Scholars think some of the artifacts are thought to be placed at the graves to satisfy the needs of the spirits and encourage them to not haunt or torment the living. All the bodies were buried so they would face east, toward the African continent.

People argued over what to do next and groups struggled for control after the discovery. They had different ideas about how to study, protect, and remember the people buried at the site. Some of the descendants wanted the archeologists to study the remains to learn about their past. Others did not want their ancestors' remains disturbed.

In 1993, the U.S. Congress decided that the plans for the federal building should be changed to accommodate the site. Congress asked scholars at Howard University to lead research on the skeletal remains in Washington, DC. The University's archeologists brought descendants into the research process. They worked together to build a research design and a memorial for the deceased. The National Park Service listed the African Burial Ground on the National Register for Historic Places that same year. In 2006, the Secretary of the Interior designated the site as a National Historic Landmark.

The National Park Service opened the African Burial Ground National Monument to the public on October 5, 2007. The opening ceremony was filled with prayers, songs, dances, and speeches. 419 drummers performed to honor the 419 individuals discovered. The memorial includes a large monument to the people buried there. The monument is made of dark granite and inscribed with symbols from African cultures. It is now a solemn space in the middle of a bustling city to reflect on the past.



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Questions for Reading 1: “Rediscovering the African Burial Ground”

1) Who was buried at the African Burial Ground? What did archeologists learn from this discovery?

2) Name one kind of cultural or religious object found at the Burial Ground. What does this item suggest about the person buried with it?

3) How was the African Burial Ground lost? Describe how New York City changed over 200 years. Why did it change?

4) Imagine your ancestors’ lost graves were uncovered at a construction site today. Would you want archeologists to study them in a lab? Why or why not? How would you want them to be remembered?



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Reading 2: Excerpt from “Rites of Ancestral Return” Schedule-of-Events, 2003.

Note: The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (New York Public Library) organized the “Rites of Ancestral Return” memorial events to honor remains found at the African Burial Ground in US cities. The bodies were placed in 419 hand-carved mahogany coffins made in Ghana, a nation on the West Coast of Africa. The slave trade forced millions of Africans to leave the African continent from Ghana’s ocean ports.

The “Rites of Ancestral Remains” commemorative ceremony, which will begin with an Evening Departure Ceremony at Howard University, will both document and celebrate the contribution of African Americans as ancestral remains from the African Burial Ground are returned from Washington, D.C., to New York City. The remains will be given a permanent resting-place on October 4, 2003, at the African Burial Ground Memorial Site.

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 30:

6:00 p.m.

“Tribute Ceremony” at Andrew Rankin Memorial Chapel, Howard University, 6th Street and Howard Place NW, Washington, D.C.

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 1:

12 noon

“Tribute Ceremony” at Willard W. Allen Masonic Temple, 1307 Eutaw Place, Baltimore, Maryland

8:15pm

“Tribute Ceremony” at Mother African Union Church, 9th and Franklin Streets, Wilmington, Delaware

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 2:

11am

“Tribute Ceremony” at Mother Bethel A.M.E. Church, 419 South 6th Street (Richard Allen Ave.), Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

6:00 p.m.

“Tribute Ceremony” at Bethany Baptist Church, 275 W. Market Street, Newark, New Jersey

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 3:

9:00 a.m.

“Flotilla Departure” at Jersey City / Liberty Island, New Jersey

11:00 a.m.

“Arrival Ceremony” at South and Wall Streets (New York's colonial slave market)

12:15 p.m.

“Procession to African Burial Ground Memorial Site”

1:00 p.m.

“Commemorative Vigil” at African Burial Ground Memorial Site, Duane and Elk Streets, New York, New York

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 4:

9:00 a.m.

Vigil Ends

11:00 a.m.

“Public Tribute and Reinternment Ceremony” in Foley Square and African Burial Ground Memorial Site, New York, New York



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Visual Evidence

Photo 1: African Burial Ground National Monument, 2009.



*Credit: Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress, Carol M. Highsmith Archive
[<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2010719186/>]*

Caption for Photo 1: African Burial Ground National Monument, 2009.

The African Burial Ground National Monument is made of dark granite and inscribed with many symbols from around the world. Each symbol captures a meaning or value that revolves around concepts like death, change, and remembrance. The buildings behind it are government offices.



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Questions for Photo 1: African Burial Ground National Monument, 2009.

1) Use the photograph to describe the African Burial Ground National Monument in your own words. Where are the symbols? What image do you see in the center of the memorial floor?

2) How did the Burial Ground site and New York City change between 1755 and 2009? Compare evidence from Photo 1 with what you learned from Map 1 and Reading 1.

3) Archeologists studied this place in the early 1990s because the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 requires historians and archeologists study land that the government wants to develop. If there was no National Historic Preservation Act, what might this place look like today? Why?



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Optional Activity 1

Tracing Paths and Exploring Destinations of The Middle Passage

New York was one of many trading ports located around the world during era of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade or “Middle Passage.” Have students investigate the slave trade beyond New York by using the online Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database [\[http://slavevoyages.org/voyage/search\]](http://slavevoyages.org/voyage/search).

Assign students to pick their own “Principal Place of Slave Landing” from the database. Then, have them research further to write an essay about how slavery was practiced in that place during a specific era, using information from the database and other online sources in their writing.

Finally, have a class discussion about how the lives of enslaved people and the laws controlling them were different depending on where Europeans took them. Ask for volunteers to read their essay or parts of their essay to the class. Finally, ask your students to compare and contrast what they learned from each other about African experiences in different parts of the world.



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Optional Activity 2

Still I Rise: Honoring Ancestors through Poetry

On October 5, 2007, African American poet Maya Angelou spoke at the dedication ceremony for the African Burial Ground National Monument. To honor the dead whose remains were buried there, she altered a verse in her poem “Still I Rise.” She said, “You may bury me in the bottom of Manhattan, I will rise. My people will get me. I will rise out of the huts of history’s shame.”

In class, have students read the poem “Still I Rise.” The poem is available online [<https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/still-i-rise>]. Then, have your students write verses of original poetry to celebrate their own ancestors in their own words. Next, combine the students’ verses into a single poem that celebrates the ancestors and heritages of the whole class.

Display the class poem on a screen so that it is visible to the students or print handouts. Lead a whole class discussion about what is meaningful to them about the poem overall and their individual experiences in contributing verses about their own personal histories and heritages. Ask them what values stand out among the verses. Have them look for similarities and differences between their contributions.

Present the class poem to the school’s yearbook for publication and/or have students read each of their verses aloud during a school assembly to raise awareness of the students’ ancestry and diverse and international backgrounds.



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Optional Activity 3

Investigating Local and Regional History through Archeology



One of the most common symbols found inside of a grave at the African Burial Ground National Monument was the Sankofa symbol.

“Sankofa” is an Adinkra (West African culture) symbol that means, “return to the past to prepare for the future”. A photograph of the symbol is available for download or viewing online at the Library of Congress [<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/highsm.03703>].

The meanings of other symbols displayed at the monument are available on the National Park Service website for the African Burial Ground National Monument [<https://www.nps.gov/afbg/learn/historyculture/adinkra-symbols.htm>].

Have students investigate etchings, drawings, and/or symbols found at an archeological sites for a known cultural group in their local community, state, or region in the United States, such as inside burials, caves, or dwellings. Students should study the symbol’s shapes and details carefully and analyze evidence for how the symbol connected the group to the natural world, animal world, spiritual beliefs, and/or the afterlife.

Have students create a poster presentation of their research findings, including their own personal drawing of their archeological findings, names of the archeological sites, county, city/town, and state or region that their findings were located.



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References and Contributing Resources

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Additional Online Resources

The websites listed below provide learners with additional information about the Middle Passage, slavery, African American heritage, and the African Burial Ground National Monument.

National Park Service

The African Burial Ground National Monument [<https://www.nps.gov/afbg/>] is a National Park Service unit and part of the National Parks of New York Harbor [<https://www.nps.gov/nynh/>]. Visit its website to learn more about the history and culture of the historic site, or to get in touch with rangers and interpreters who specialize in Colonial New York history and African Burial Ground topics.

National Parks Conservation Association

African Burial Ground National Monument is part of the National Parks Conservation Association [<https://www.npca.org/>] “hidden treasures” of New York video series. The virtual tour of the historic Manhattan cemetery is available on YouTube [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eJHGQgEEBko>].

NPR

National Public Radio produced a 5-minute audio feature story in October 2003 about African Burial Ground : “New York Reburies Remains of Colonial-Era Blacks”. The feature piece provides a short-and-sweet history of the African Burial Ground, preparations to rebury the remains of 419 people found at the cemetery, and interviews with New York residents and preservationists to reveal feelings and perspectives on the reburial. [<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1455525>]

NPR also produced a 12-minute online radio story on “Unearthing New York’s Forgotten Slavery Era”. The story features interviews with two men who led the movement to create the African Burial Ground National Monument: Michael Blakely and Howard Dodson. [<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=15187759>]

The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture at The New York Public Library

The New York Public Library’s Shomburg Center published an online exhibit about the African Burial Ground. The exhibit showcases images of the burial sites and artifacts found during the excavations, as well as videos from the October 2003 Rites of Ancestral Return. [<http://web-static.nypl.org/exhibitions/afb/shell.html>]



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New York Historical Society

Access historical maps of “Black New York City” during the years 1785 to 1835, digitized and made available online by the New York Historical Society. The maps highlight schools, churches, theaters, newspaper companies, bookshops, and mutual-aid societies created by black New Yorkers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Manhattan. [<https://www.nyhistory.org/web/africanfreeschool/map/map-print.html>]

The New York Historical Society’s exhibit about slavery in the city is not online but a companion website [<http://www.slaveryinnewyork.org/education.htm>] offers online resources for teachers, including lesson plans and primary sources about the history of slavery in New York City.

University of Virginia Library and The Virginia Foundation for the Humanities

The Digital Media Lab at the University of Virginia Library and the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities produced a database of over one thousand historic photographs of the transatlantic slave trade, enslaved Africans in the Americas, as well as contemporary drawings of these experiences. [<http://www.slaveryimages.org/>]

City of New York from an actual Survey



