

**Preserve America Presidential Awards
African Burial Ground Project, New York, NY**

Advisory Council on Historic Preservation

May 2008

Media Contacts:

Renee Miscione, GSA, Public Affairs Officer, 212-264-8260, 347-675-3581, renee.miscione@gsa.gov

Laini Madhubuti, Schomburg Center, 212- 491-2259, lmadhubuti@nypl.org

Program Text:

Discovery of the African Burial Ground on Manhattan reshaped contemporary understanding of American history regarding the role of slavery throughout North America. The site, dated to the end of the 17th century, revealed largely forgotten stories of enslaved and some free Africans in the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam—today's New York City. By 1794 the burial ground held the remains of an estimated 20,000 people. The city grew around and over it, and it was lost. The General Services Administration encountered the site during excavation for a new federal building. After a series of challenges were successfully overcome, the uncovered human remains were respectfully reinterred, and the African Burial Ground became a National Monument that recalls and interprets the lives of these Africans and their important contributions to our nation.

Comments:

“There is no other national monument in our country that addresses either slavery or the early African American experience, and we are honored to be home of this tribute to those who lived and died here. It is our hope that those who visit this monument will be reminded of how far we have come, and may the memory of those buried here be forever honored.”

-Mayor Michael Bloomberg, New York City

“The African Burial Ground National Monument is a significant addition to the National Park System. We must tell the stories of all Americans, and the burial ground is a place where we reach into the past and have an opportunity to touch the future by telling stories of the Africans who worked to make New York City and the nation strong.”

-Dennis Reidenbach, Northeast Regional Director, National Park Service

The Presidential Awards jury commented that this is a remarkable project and an excellent example of how to handle remains. They also noted that the General Services Administration emerged from a poor position and is now a leader. The path was complicated, and GSA did a 180 degree shift.

Additional Information:

The African Burial Ground is widely acknowledged as one of America's most significant archaeological finds of the 20th century. Nearly two decades have been dedicated to this discovery. The African Burial Ground Project is redefining history, exposing a heritage overlooked, and serving as a powerful reminder of the indomitable spirit of New York's first Africans and the contributions they made to the cultural, spiritual, and economic development of this nation.

In May 1991, the site of a new federal office building, just north of City Hall at Broadway and Duane Street in Lower Manhattan, collided with history. Plans to erect a 34-story, \$276 million office tower with an adjoining four-story pavilion required that a cultural resource survey, including archaeological field-testing, be completed. In the very last days of an extensive excavation process, the project team unearthed the first of more than 400 skeletal remains of men, women, and children.

The African Burial Ground came to be used by New York's African population toward the end of the 17th century. Africans were forbidden to bury their dead in officially consecrated graveyards such as nearby Trinity Church. Called "The Negros Buriel [sic] Ground" on maps from the period, it was a desolate five-and-a-half-acre plot north of Wall Street. By 1794, an estimated 20,000 people were buried there, stacked layer upon layer.

The Cobb Laboratory of Howard University provided an archaeological, bio-anthropological and historical study which now documents the conditions, customs, characteristics, and quality of life of New York's 17th and 18th century Africans. Howard University, along with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Center of Expertise for the Curation and Management of Archaeological Collections, under the direction of the U.S. General Services Administration, produced the African Burial Ground Final History Report, the African Burial Ground Final Skeletal Biology Report, and the African Burial Ground Final Archaeology Report.

The African presence in Colonial New York is rarely taught and seldom discussed. Even less has been publicized about the contributions made by captive African laborers and half-free and freed farmers. Their labor greatly enabled the building and prosperity of New York City. The discovery of the African Burial Ground and the multidisciplinary study of the remains prove conclusively that the second wave of arrivals to New York were captured Africans.

A tangible and enduring cultural and spiritual monument, the African Burial Ground Project, a \$50 million dollar national investment, serves as a vital link to a history long disregarded and forgotten. The African Burial Ground site also contributes substantively to New York's cultural richness, adding to an array of cultural monuments celebrating the participation of immigrant communities in the history of the city.

CRITERIA FOR AWARDS

The Preserve America Presidential Awards are annual awards given to organizations, businesses, government entities, and individuals for:

- exemplary accomplishments in the sustainable use and preservation of cultural or natural heritage assets;
- demonstrated commitment to the protection and interpretation of America's cultural or natural heritage assets; and
- integration of these assets into contemporary community life, combining innovative, creative, and responsible approaches to showcasing historic local resources.

The recipients are chosen through a national competition administered by the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, the Department of Commerce, and the Department of the Interior, in cooperation with the Executive Office of the President.