

Media Advisory



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Rodney Léon Tapped To Design National Historic Landmark *Winner to Create Memorial for 17th, 18th-Century Africans*

NEW YORK – The U.S. General Services Administration, in partnership with the National Park Service, today announced Rodney Léon as the designer who will create the African Burial Ground permanent memorial in New York City.

GSA Administrator Stephen A. Perry has said the integrity and thoroughness of the selection process will soon result in an exterior memorial befitting the national and international significance of the African Burial Ground, and one that will provide a deeply enriching experience for this generation and all that will follow.

Rodney Léon was one of five designers selected from 61 applicants to an initial call for proposals in 1998. Throughout the design competition, design professionals of African descent offered advice and counsel. In June 2004, NPS convened the five finalist designers for a series of public forums in New York City's five boroughs. The finalists presented their designs for public comment and each designer revised their designs based on public feedback from these presentations. Throughout September 2004, the public was able to see the completed designs and comment on them at six locations in New York City's five boroughs, as well as on the official African Burial Ground Web site. Public comments on the five finalists' designs are posted at www.africanburialground.com

"My design tells the story and speaks to the greatness of a people who never ceased to push for freedom," said Rodney Léon. "Their story began in Africa, and the origin of my design was born there too. By traveling to Africa and incorporating the shapes and forms, as well as the essence of the culture and people, I have created a *living* memorial to the ancestors and their stories."

(more)

“The National Park Service has been privileged to assist GSA with the selection of a memorial design for the African Burial Ground,” said Maria Burks of the National Park Service. “Clearly, Rodney Léon’s work will prove a fitting and lasting testament to the legacy of the Africans and African Americans who helped build New York City and this nation.”

“This beautiful memorial is of national and international significance for those of us who are African Americans as well as other people of African descent worldwide,” said Congressman Charles B. Rangel of New York’s 15th Congressional District. “It will stand as a permanent symbol of our caring and concern that our ancestors buried here receive their just recognition and respect.”

One of the most significant archaeological finds in U.S. history, the burial ground stretched more than five city blocks during the 17th and 18th centuries. It is estimated that nearly 20,000 enslaved and free Africans are buried in the cemetery. The first Africans arrived in New Amsterdam about 1625. Along with European merchants, traders, sailors and farmers, these enslaved workers helped to establish the early colony. Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, Africans were an important part of the city’s population, reaching a peak of over twenty percent. The African Burial Ground has been designated a New York City Historic District and a National Landmark. During 2004, the GSA and the NPS gathered public feedback on the finalist memorial designs through the African Burial Ground Web site (www.africanburialground.com) and special exhibits and public forums.

Additionally, the NPS is preparing for GSA a report of its recommendations for the management and long-term stewardship of the African Burial Ground. A draft of this report will be available to the public later this year.

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