

## Relevant Unit Objectives

### Module 1: African American Community and Culture

#### This lesson addresses the following Essential Questions:

- How did the existence of slavery shape African American communal life and cultural expression?
- How is community defined?
- How was the African American community defined?

## Objectives of the Lesson

### Aim

How does the discovery of the African Burial Ground change our understanding of African American communal life in early New York?

#### At the conclusion of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Identify important factual information about the African Burial Ground
- Hypothesize about the lives of enslaved Africans in colonial New York from the evidence uncovered at the African Burial Ground
- Develop empathic understanding of the significance of the loss and rediscovery of the remains of those buried at the African Burial Ground

## Introduction

Ask students how many of them have ever seen any exhibit containing human remains – such as a skeleton at a science museum, a fossil of early human remains at a natural history museum, a mummy in a historical museum, etc. What types of things do they imagine can be learned from these remains about the lives the individuals led? For example, if a mummy were buried with elaborate jewelry, we might conclude that the person was very wealthy and led a privileged life. What might be learned from the manner in which the person was buried? For example, because mummies were often buried in pyramids with supplies for daily living and statues of servants, we conclude that this person believed in an afterlife and the necessity of having these objects available when s/he came back to life. Ask students to brainstorm a list of five things they might be able to learn from such exhibits, and then poll them on their answers.

Next, ask students to consider what it would mean for a particular group of people if we did not have any remains or records of their burials or funeral rites. Would it mean that, in a certain sense, they never really existed? Why is it important to have these remains and understand them?

Explain to students that in this lesson, they will investigate these questions in terms of the African Burial Ground in Lower Manhattan. While it was used actively for more than a century, it had been long since forgotten since the late 1700s. Layers and layers of urban development were built upon it, as if the remains were not even there. In the

early 1990s, while excavations were underway for a government office building, skeletal remains were found. They turned out to be the graves of Africans, most of them enslaved in colonial times. Students will endeavor to understand how the discovery of these remains – and careful examination of them by experts – fundamentally changes our perceptions of people whom history had largely forgotten.

### Instructional Procedures

#### Step One: Researching the African Burial Ground

Students will use the visitor's brochure for the African Burial Ground developed by the National Park Service. It can be downloaded in PDF form by going to the home page of the NPS website, at [http://www.africanburialground.gov/ABG\\_Main.htm](http://www.africanburialground.gov/ABG_Main.htm). Scroll down to "Other Documents," and click on the link for "African Burial Ground Brochure – October 2003."

Distribute the Handout, "Worksheet: Researching the African Burial Ground." Students will use the brochure to answer questions on this worksheet.

#### Step Two: Analyzing a photograph of the African Burial Ground

Ask students to look at the photograph of Burial 213 (this can be done online or can be reproduced by the teacher). It is available at:

<http://www.nps.gov/afbg/historyculture/preservation.htm>

The instructor will then ask students to consider the following questions:

1. Who was buried at this site?
2. Do we know the person's name? Why or why not?
3. What is the large brick hole at the center of the burial?
4. What general conclusions can be drawn about the attitude of the public toward these gravesites for much of New York's history from the presence of this hole?

#### Step Three: Discussion

The instructor will begin by asking students to read the following paragraphs:

*The existence of the African Burial Ground throughout the 18th century, and perhaps dating back to the 17th century, is strong evidence that enslaved Africans in colonial New York City built a lively collective and spiritual life in spite of their legal and social disenfranchisement under racial slavery. It would appear that contrary to the assumptions of much professional historiography, slavery in the northern cities did not isolate enslaved African from one another but instead provided the impetus for the construction of a uniquely African American society and culture. What little is known about New York Africans from this period was not written by Africans themselves, but by people who kept them in bondage, and who in general saw them as a work force, or "beasts of burden." In fact, enslaved Africans played a major role in building this most cosmopolitan and powerful city in the "New World." The African Burial Ground is important because by studying and analyzing this colonial African population we may learn about the lives of some instrumental and much neglected people of early New York history.*

--From "African Burial Ground: Frequently Asked Questions," by Dr. Sherrill D. Wilson, March 14, 1994  
(Available at <http://www.africanburialground.duke.edu/abgfaq.htm>)

*The African Burial Ground is widely acknowledged as one of America's most significant archeological finds of the 20th Century. It is destined to redefine the history of one of the world's greatest cities, change the way African Americans are viewed, and, perhaps most importantly, how they view themselves.*

*The African presence in colonial New York is well documented, but little taught and seldom discussed. Even less has been publicized about the contribution captive African laborers, half-free farmers and freed individuals made. 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. New York's history will now have to be rewritten to reflect that these men, women and children as are much a part of it as those Europeans who came of their own free will.*

--From the National Park Service brochure on The African Burial Ground

Next, the instructor will lead a discussion based on the following questions:

1. Based on these quotes and what you have learned from the worksheet, does the existence of the African Burial Ground change your perception of colonial New York? Why or why not? If so, in what ways?
2. Which single fact about the Burial Ground stands out most in your mind? Why?
3. Are you surprised by the fact that the Burial Ground was unknown and neglected for so long? Explain your answer.
4. The Burial Ground was originally called the "Negro Burial Ground." Why do you think the name was changed to "African Burial Ground"? Think of some of the facts you learned about the graves.
5. What overall conclusions can you draw about the lives of African children in colonial New York?
6. Do you agree with the decision to remove these graves for study and re-inter them later? Why or why not?
7. Why is it important for New Yorkers and others to visit the African Burial Ground? What might they learn from visiting this site?

#### **Step Four: Designing a Memorial for the African Burial Ground**

As a summative activity, students will be asked to design an original memorial for the African Burial Ground. This may be done as a drawing, written description, three-dimensional model, computer design, or in any other appropriate format. Each student must incorporate a minimum of five pieces of factual information about the Burial Ground into his or her design. It is up to each student to decide which information s/he feels is most relevant and important. Each student should submit a brief written description of his or her design, explaining the central themes and ideas and identifying how the factual information has been incorporated into the design.

After the designs have been submitted, the instructor may wish to show students the design that was selected for construction at the actual African Burial Ground site, which was designed by architect Rodney Leon. It is available at: [http://www.africanburialground.gov/Memorial/ABG\\_MemorialDesign\\_RodneyLeon.htm](http://www.africanburialground.gov/Memorial/ABG_MemorialDesign_RodneyLeon.htm)

Ask students to discuss why they think this design was selected, and which specific features of it are most likely to help visitors better understand the African Burial Ground.

**Materials**

- National Park Service Brochure for the African Burial Ground  
(Can be downloaded in PDF form by going from the home page of the NPS website, at [http://www.africanburialground.gov/ABG\\_Main.htm](http://www.africanburialground.gov/ABG_Main.htm). Scroll down to “Other Documents,” and click on the link for “African Burial Ground Brochure – October 2003)
- Photograph of Burial 213  
<http://www.nps.gov/afbg/historyculture/preservation.htm>
- African Burial Ground Memorial, designed by Rodney Leon  
[http://www.africanburialground.gov/Memorial/ABG\\_MemorialDesign\\_RodneyLeon.htm](http://www.africanburialground.gov/Memorial/ABG_MemorialDesign_RodneyLeon.htm)
- “African Burial Ground Frequently Asked Questions,” by Dr. Sherrill D. Wilson, March 14, 1994  
(available at <http://www.africanburialground.duke.edu/abgfaq.htm>)

## Handout : Worksheet – Researching the African Burial Ground

1. The brochure states that the Africans were buried on this site “due to a kind of ‘mortuary apartheid.’” Explain what is meant by this phrase.
2. When was the African Burial Ground used as a gravesite?
3. Approximately how many people were buried there?
4. Why was the burial site forgotten until recently?
5. When and how was the burial site rediscovered?
6. How many remains were found at that time?
7. Why were there protests about the excavations at that time? Who was involved in these protests?
8. What designation was given to the Burial Ground in 1993?
9. Where were the remains taken to be studied? Why was this institution chosen?
10. What percentage of the remains studied were those of children?
11. What does the figure in question 10 tell us about the death rate of African children in colonial New York?
12. What other facts about the lives of these children have been learned from the study of their remains?
13. What was the average age of the adults buried in the Burial Ground?

14. What are “enthesopathies,” and what do they tell us about the lives of the people buried in the Burial Ground?
15. What was the heart-shaped design found in one of the graves and what is its significance?
16. What did archeologists discover about the teeth of some of the people buried in the Burial Ground, and why is this important?
17. What is the meaning of the glass beads found in some of the burial sites?
18. Briefly describe what we know about the young boy now known only as “#39.”
19. What happened to the remains in October, 2003, after they were studied?
20. Briefly describe the coffins used for the re-internment. Why do you think these designs were selected?