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Interpreting the African Burial Ground: Science and Public History

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The African Burial Ground is a colonial period cemetery that was in use through 1795 in what is now lower Manhattan. In 1991-92, archaeologists excavated the site in advance of construction for a new federal government office building, disinterring the skeletal remains of 419 individuals. The site was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1993, and a National Historic Monument in February 2006. Interpretive media for the new Visitors Center, which will open in 2008, is currently being designed by the Boston firm Amaze Design. Slavery will be a central focus, since the great majority of those interred at the cemetery would have been enslaved during their lives. Content will be informed by the scholarly research conducted by a team based at Howard University under the direction of Dr. Michael L. Blakey.

Public involvement dates to 1991, when protests against the excavation of the site began. A self-identified descendant community (mainly African American

New Yorkers) demanded participation in decision-making, and became active parties to the federal “Cultural Resource Management” process in which the project was imbedded. They weighed in forcefully on the selection of a research team as well as the research agenda itself. The scholars conducting the research formulated an approach that was rigorous, respectful, and responsive to what they termed their “ethical client.” An Office of Public Education and Interpretation for the project, headed by Dr. Sherrill D. Wilson, provided outreach services for over a decade. The National Park Service process dictates that public involvement continues into the design of the Visitors Center. Countless public meetings informed the agency’s site management recommendations, and a series of public meetings ensure input from the community from schematic design through final content development for the exhibits and film. Consensus exists only on the most general level, but the basic charge is: provide a space for healing and an opportunity for teaching youngsters the truth about their history; keep the fact of slavery and the broader context of the Atlantic political economy front and center; acknowledge that those buried here had real connections to African cultures; put a human face on the past.

The use, along with more traditional history, of various kinds of scientific research (archaeology and physical anthropology, including skeletal biology and genetics) brings its own perils and promises to the representation of slavery. Excavated graves, artifacts, and skeletal remains are in one sense much more direct than many of the types of documentary evidence that we use to understand the lives of the enslaved, but are just as open to interpretation and

misinterpretation. As every museum professional knows, objects can be powerful tools for teaching and evoking visitor response. But human remains and objects that were placed in graves generate both heightened curiosity and often intense emotion.

Finding 419 (out of an estimated 15 to 20 thousand) graves of deceased Africans in downtown New York says nothing in and of itself about their enslavement or the nature of slavery, though often people suppose the deaths themselves to have been violent (violence standing in for a whole spectrum of social, psychological, and physical brutality). At the very least, people expect the cemetery to provide clear evidence of disrespect afforded Africans in death, which it does not. People tend to expect science to provide unambiguous information about individual people, but bones and teeth provide a limited (albeit remarkable) window on a person's life. We can reasonably assign ages, and for adults sex, but bones are mute about social roles. Ancient DNA or trace chemicals, even an occasional artifact may point to geographical areas, but cannot pinpoint African origins. We do not know the circumstances of death for individuals; trauma, chronic diseases, malnourishment, or repeated muscular stress can leave their mark on bones or teeth, but death probably usually occurred more rapidly, from infectious disease. We know little about the funerals that took place graveside, and burial objects are often mysterious to us despite wide ranging comparative information.

That said, representing slavery using archaeological and/or skeletal evidence requires special attention to the "how do we know?" component of an

exhibit. Explaining the evidence can take up as much space and time as telling the story. Perils include oversimplification, reification, and, cumulatively, misdirection (intended or not), not to mention didacticism. Teams of researchers marshal evidence and arrive at reasonable inferences – do we walk an audience through the process? Can we exhibit the painstaking work of taking all relevant variables into account? How do we gloss things like sampling error or explain conflicting data? How do we show the elegance of method and technique and the thrill of discovery without either neglecting or over-dramatizing the ultimate finding? How do we convey intense poignancy through hard-won information that at first seems either opaque or ordinary (a population profile, coffins made of various woods, pins, arthritic joints, healthy teeth in childhood)? How do we include scientists as talking heads without losing the audience? The promise is that the evidence, richer than ever before, not only deepens our knowledge base about peoples' experience under slavery, with data that have not been filtered through contemporary (racist) writings, but also provides a ready entrée for a general audience. Going from “the work was hard and constant” to “it did this to peoples' bodies” is an important way, for instance, to revisit a truism about slavery. Media that present the faces and voices of committed scientists may be able to foster identification with and trust in the researchers themselves. There is a wonderful opportunity to demonstrate tangibly how “scientific” and “historical” information come together to better inform us about slavery in a particular place like New York. “How do we know” can become part of the continuing story, providing people with connections to the sorrow in their collective past, to

multiple ways of finding out the truth about that past, and to the future telling of that truth.