

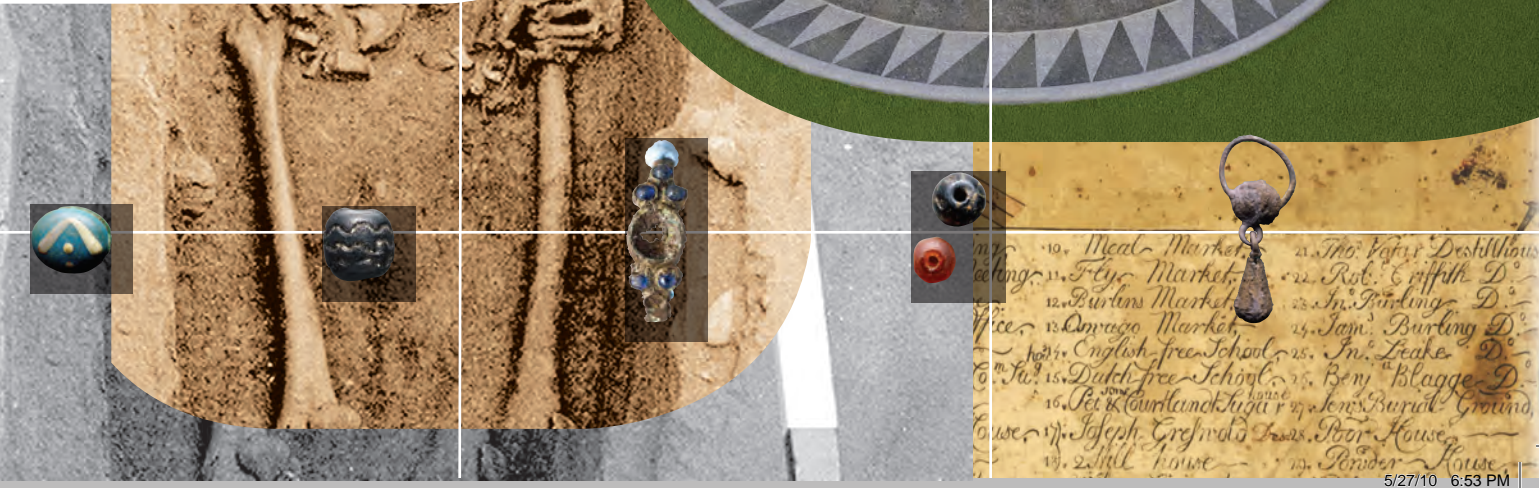
# A Plan of the City of New York from an actual Survey



U.S. General Services Administration



## THE NEW YORK AFRICAN BURIAL GROUND: Unearthing the African Presence in Colonial New York





The New York African Burial Ground  
*Unearthing the African Presence in Colonial New York*

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Michael Heilen and Maria Molina (Statistical Research), and Brian Fagan (Lindbriar Corporation)

Graphics Support  
Margaret Robbins (Statistical Research)

Design and Layout  
Simpson and Convent

Cover Design  
Star Bullock + Associates, Mark A. Bartley

Cover Images  
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# FOREWORD

Long forgotten and once remote, New York's African Burial Ground was the final resting place of hundreds, possibly thousands, of people of African descent who lived and died in New York in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It is located in what is now the bustling financial district of Lower Manhattan.

*The New York African Burial Ground: Unearthing the African Presence in Colonial New York* briefly tells the story of the rediscovery and recovery of that site and of its importance to the city, state, and nation. It is a complex and captivating story involving many people, places, cultures, and concepts over many centuries and across many continents.

Ultimately, the New York African Burial Ground represents triumph over adversity and victory over extreme challenge and circumstance. Its story unfolds now, in the twenty-first century, only through the tireless efforts of many dedicated community members, public servants, civil servants, scientists, and historians who spoke up, lobbied, investigated, and challenged each other to ensure that the people buried in that once-again sacred space receive their just recognition and respect. The General Services Administration, on behalf of the American people, provided funding for several initiatives related to the New York African Burial Ground Project.

The content of this book is derived primarily from the three reports that form the foundation of Howard University's New York African Burial Ground Project—*The Skeletal Biology of the New York African Burial Ground*, *The Archaeology of the New York African Burial Ground*, and *Historical Perspectives of the New York African Burial Ground*. Prepared to be easily accessible by the general public, the purpose of this book is to explain in layman's terms, project activities and research findings. To that end, it provides an overview of the massive research project whose goal was to study

that site and “unearth” the depth and breadth of the African presence in New York. It briefly presents the findings resulting from the study of the unearthed bones and artifacts in scientific laboratories at Howard University, John Milner Associates, and other research centers where dozens of scientists and academics devoted countless hours to this project. It also explains key concepts and theories addressed by the researchers. Photographs, illustrations, maps, and charts mainly from the technical volumes, bring the substance of the researchers' explorations to life in vivid detail.

Many people have struggled to ensure that the story of the New York African Burial Ground is told, true and clear, and for a variety of audiences. We hope that this publication will help people from different backgrounds and experiences gain a better understanding of the importance of this site and of the involvement of African Americans in the birth and growth of New York and our nation as a whole. We encourage readers to delve deeper into the project research by consulting the aforementioned larger technical volumes.

O. Jackson Cole, Ph.D.  
Howard University Executive-in-Charge of the African Burial Ground Project

James A. Donaldson, Ph.D.  
Dean, College of Arts and Sciences  
Howard University  
Washington, D.C.  
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*The New York African Burial Ground*

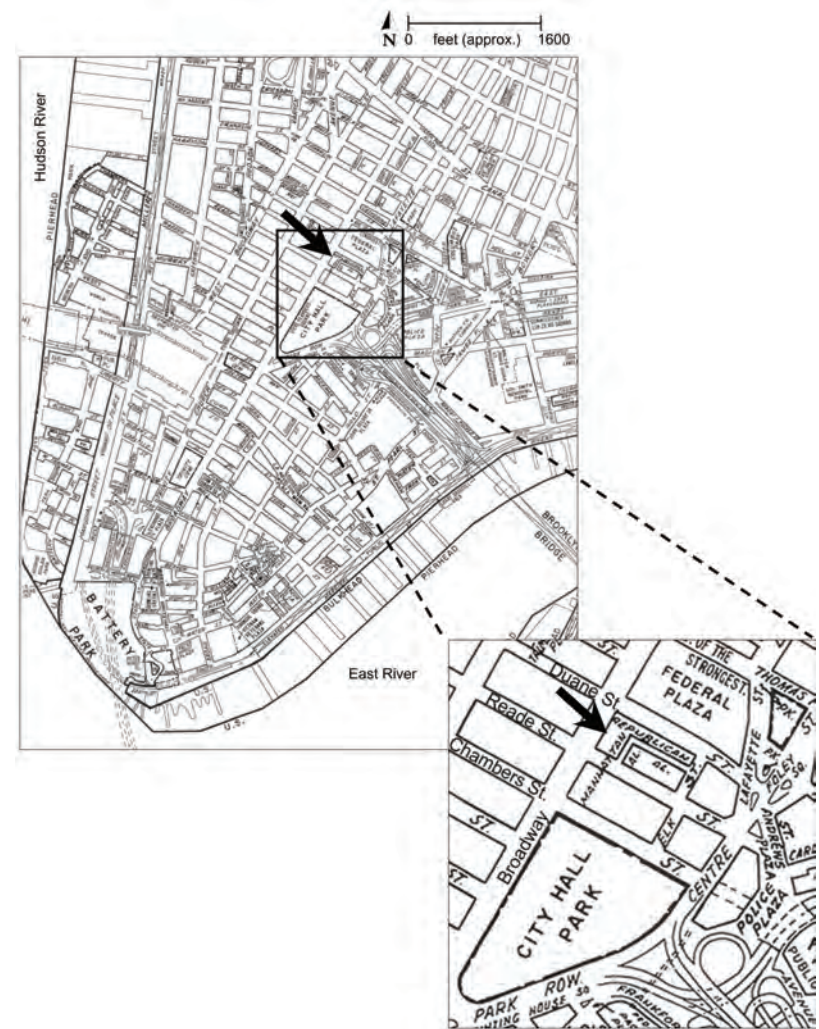
# THE AFRICAN BURIAL GROUND

In a remote part of colonial Manhattan that would later become the center of bustling New York City, African people, though enslaved, maintained their dignity by celebrating the links between the living and the dead at the African Burial Ground. In so doing, they made the plot of ground designated for their interment a deeply sacred place. We will probably never know the names and identities of the men, women, and children buried in the graveyard. By studying the bones and materials recovered from their burial ground, however, we now know much more about their lives. This is the story of the African Burial Ground and the people who were buried there.

## CHAPTER I

### *The New York African Burial Ground Project*

The New York African Burial Ground is one of the most important archaeological and historical discoveries of the twentieth century. The burial ground was first used actively around 1650 and was closed by 1795. Located in what we now know as Lower Manhattan, New York City, the burial ground was the final resting place for as many as 15,000 people. Most were enslaved Africans. Others were free Africans or people who had escaped slavery or indentured servitude. Research teams in the disciplines of history, archaeology, and skeletal biology joined together to study the remains of these African New Yorkers, whose burials are evidence that their hard work, varied skills, and diverse cultures built one of the world's great cities and contributed much to New York's history. Forgotten for more than a hundred years, part of the African Burial Ground was uncovered in 1991 during archaeological excavations at 290 Broadway. The site was excavated because the General Services Administration (GSA) agency needed to build federal offices there. At first, archaeologists thought that only a few burials, perhaps 50 at most, were present in some areas of the site. Most of the graves, they believed, had been destroyed by earlier construction on the site.



Location of African Burial Ground archaeological excavation site in lower Manhattan, New York. Arrows point to Block 154. *New York City Mapped Streets, Section 12, 1997.* (New York City Mapped Street: Section 12—Borough of Manhattan, New York County; used with permission of the New York City Department of City Planning. All rights reserved.) (From *The Archaeology of the New York African Burial Ground, Part 1.*)





Top, Burial 12 (from *The Skeletal Biology of the New York African Burial Ground, Part 2*); middle, enslaved domestic laborers in eighteenth-century New York (illustration by Michael Colbert, 2004) (from *Historical Perspectives of the African Burial Ground*); bottom, construction during archaeological fieldwork (photograph by Dennis Seckler); right, the Directory Plan of 1789, showing the city just before the closing of the African Burial Ground (Geography & Map Division, Library of Congress) (bottom and right images from *The Archaeology of the New York African Burial Ground, Part 1*).