

Burial Ground Bears Witness to a Segregated City

by {ga=tangotti}

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After 16 years of planning, research, excavation and development, New Yorkers recently celebrated the opening of the [African Burial Ground Memorial in lower Manhattan](#). Speakers including poet Maya Angelou and Mayor Michael Bloomberg

[recognized](#)

the significance of remembering the long-forgotten burial site where some 15,000 to 20,000 people were interred. Remains from the burial site were uncovered in 1991 during construction of the federal office building on Duane Street and Broadway. A portion of the site is now a National Historic Landmark and National Monument.

But while Bloomberg acknowledged that “for two centuries slavery was widespread in New York City,” the ceremony and the flurry of press reports about it seemed to treat the burial site only as a reminder of past injustice and not as an opportunity to understand and reflect on the powerful historical connections to the present. Put in its true context, the burial grounds serves as a reminder of the powerful role that real estate has always played in displacing African Americans.

How The Burial Grounds Were Created

During the period of Dutch and English settlement, New York City was one of the nation’s largest urban centers for the [slave trade](#) and served as a financial patron of the plantation economy in the South. The city also had a sizeable population of slaves and freed blacks in New York City. In the Dutch colony, as many as 40 percent of the population were slaves.

Slaves had no choice of residence and were themselves treated like a commodity, first displaced from their homes in Africa and then traded in a public marketplace at the foot of Wall Street. But even freed blacks found their options limited by official and unofficial discrimination and by changes in the city. When land values and rents went up in the more populated areas of lower Manhattan, blacks were forced to find housing uptown. They kept being pushed uptown in successive waves until the formation of black Harlem. Those who could afford to buy property were often forced to seek land outside Manhattan in settlements like Weeksville, Brooklyn. This constant displacement, experienced in different ways by all people of modest means including many immigrant groups, was especially onerous for black people because discrimination in the real estate market limited their choices.

The African Burial Grounds in lower Manhattan were a result of this displacement process and associated discrimination. At the end of the 17th century, Trinity Church formally banned blacks from its cemetery in lower Manhattan as land in the fortified city became scarce. This led to the

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creation of the African burial grounds outside the walls of the old city.

By the end of the 18th century, however, the city had expanded beyond the walls and the African burial ground became desirable real estate. It was filled and leveled and then sold by the property owners. Given the exclusion of blacks from government, the public sector was blind to the importance that African culture places on the remembrance of ancestors, including the places where they lived and are buried.

Black Displacement and the Segregated City

The official barriers to racial equality in the city were removed in stages, but “enlightened” New York wasn’t far ahead of the South. In 1827, slavery was [abolished in New York State](#), but until 1854 blacks were banned from “whites-only” streetcars. The

[Draft Riots of 1863](#)

, and other white-led

[race riots in 1900](#)

, targeted black communities and contributed further to their displacement.

In the 20th century, the federal [urban renewal program](#) resulted in the destruction of many black and mixed communities, leading to its being dubbed “Negro removal.” At the same time, federal mortgage guarantees did not apply in black neighborhoods. Thus blacks who were forced to move would not have the many options available to other groups. And the neighborhoods, and burial grounds, they left behind were quickly swept away.

Now, displacement of black communities continues to be complicated by the limited choices available, resulting in constant resegregation. In studies of racial segregation, New York consistently comes out as among the most divided cities. While new immigrant communities tend to be more diverse, the black/white divide in New York remains prominent, as revealed in a recent [study](#). Real estate agents steer blacks away from mixed neighborhoods in many subtle ways and whites away from neighborhoods where blacks are moving in (this is known as blockbusting). Gentrification of traditionally black neighborhoods prices people out of the areas they have worked for generations to improve. Are No Sites Sacred?

As blacks have been forced out of communities the neighborhoods, and burial grounds, they left behind were quickly swept away. New York’s African Burial Ground provides a vivid example of this.

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The similarities and differences between the official responses to rebuilding the World Trade Center site and to the African Burial Ground provide some perspective on this. After 9/11, Governor George Pataki led the pack of officials calling for a rapid restoration of the 13 million square feet of office space at Ground Zero. There was ample support for this in the media and among the city's powerful real estate community. The Real Estate Board of New York declared: "We know it is important that downtown remain and grow as a powerful engine of the city's, region's and nation's economies. The best living memorial to those who perished in the World Trade Center attack is to make sure that lower Manhattan emerges from this tragedy as a spectacular center of the global economy."

The survivors' families did not agree. Their powerful, organized voices led the state to scrap its original plans to rebuild Ground Zero without a memorial. The families formed multiple organizations, and while some demanded (with support from former mayor Rudolph Giuliani) that the entire site remain open and dedicated as a memorial to 9/11, they all insisted that there had to be a significant memorial. The use of the [footprints](#) of the two World Trade Center towers for that purpose eventually became a part of the final plan.

The Ground Zero story may illustrate the powerful role of real estate interests to retain prime office space. But it also demonstrates how that role can be limited when people organize and find powerful patrons in government.

In the case of the African Burial Ground, African American groups faced initial resistance from the federal government. It took a good deal of active organizing by the groups to push for development of the memorial, and the process dragged on for 16 years. Most amazing, however, is the fairly limited size of the memorial footprint. The federal government never seriously considered canceling its office tower project for a more prominent memorial. Construction of the federal building was hardly delayed, and it now casts a long shadow over the moving "Ancestral Libation Chamber." Despite the National Park Service's quality programming for the site, it is easy to lose sight of this treasure among the shadows of downtown towers.

This seems to be part of a larger pattern. This city, which has always had a sizeable African

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American population, has a disproportionately small number of historic landmarks in African American communities. In part this is a result of the traditional emphasis in preservation circles on noble buildings by star architects (of European descent) and the resistance by traditional preservationists to preserving places as memorials to important historical events and cultural practices. (A good antidote to this thinking is [Place Matters](#) .) Beyond that, though, it appears that every memorial site in the Big Apple needs vocal advocates to balance the powerful pull of the real estate industry.

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Land Use readers may be interested in the recently released community plan for the Vanderbilt Yards, an alternative to Forest City Ratner's stalled megaproject. Go to www.unityplan.org for information and press reports.

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