



Chapter 3
CIVIC ENGAGEMENT



GSA and NPS Civic Engagement

Effective public participation was required to accomplish the tasks assigned to the National Park Service by the interagency agreement between the GSA and the NPS.

It is NPS policy that “all National Park Service units and offices embrace civic engagement as the essential foundation and framework for creating plans and developing programs. Civic engagement is a continuous, dynamic conversation with the public on many levels that reinforces public commitment to the preservation of heritage resources, both cultural and natural, and that strengthens public understanding of the full meaning and contemporary relevance of these resources. The foundation of civic engagement is a commitment to building and sustaining relationships with neighbors and communities of interest” (NPS Director’s Order 75A, November 2003). The NPS believes that the African Burial Ground deserves the strongest education and interpretive program, and that it requires the permanent support of a broad constituency, including an informed and committed public, to achieve that goal. Effective civic engagement could begin that connection between management and public.

Since many individuals and organizations had been previously involved and a great deal of important public comment already existed, both the GSA and the NPS agreed that the NPS needed to thoroughly study and incorporate public and other input into NPS recommendations. Sources for such input included the Memorandum of Agreement for the African Burial Ground with the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation and the NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission, the recommendations of the Federal Steering Committee for the African Burial Ground, the work of the Office of Public Education and Interpretation, and the scopes of work and process identified by the GSA, especially regarding development of the interpretive

center and memorial competitions.

All parties understood that successful relationships would be crucial as the work proceeded, and it was critical to acknowledge that relations regarding the African Burial Ground between the federal government and the interested organizations and members of the public were not working. First, there was the widespread belief that the exhumation of the bodies by the government and the construction of a building over a portion of the burial ground were, fundamentally, acts of desecration. Many people would participate in this project with the aim of assuring the protection of African ancestors, not to assist the federal government. Also, because the project had proceeded so fitfully over more than a decade, many questioned the capacity of government to provide consistent management, and to remember and keep promises. These factors and others placed an imperative on the importance of consistent relationships and communication. Early discussions among the NPS, the OPEI, the GSA and others always included soliciting help in identifying organizations and individuals who had either been involved with the African Burial Ground over the years or who might have a natural interest in planning for its future. Insofar as possible, previous discussions and writings about the protection, interpretation, and research of the African Burial Ground were collected and consulted. Hundreds of pages of reports, newsletters, and other documents were read; videotapes of earlier public meetings and documentary films were reviewed, and files were searched. Thanks to the persistence of committed members of the public, copies of old surveys were located, reviewed, and utilized as complements to more recent opinion and comment.

All civic engagement efforts started with listening. Informal meetings and Listening Sessions were the focus of the preliminary outreach effort. Those meetings were with organizations and individuals who were known to be committed to demonstrating proper respect for the Africans who had been buried at the site, and known to be dedicated



to assuring that the story and meaning of the African Burial Ground would never be forgotten again.

Listening Sessions

These early informational meetings were held with people who had a particular stake in the African Burial Ground and who would understandably expect to be consulted as soon as possible. They were also the people who would help assure consistency and continuity. During listening sessions, NPS introduced its staff, explained the agency's role, listened to the participants' concerns and issues, and requested participant involvement in the upcoming effort. The OPEI director, Sherrill Wilson, Ph.D., was instrumental in identifying and contacting critical individuals. In all, five listening sessions were held between January and March 2004.

Listening sessions were held with the following groups:

1. OPEI volunteers
2. Friends of the African Burial Ground and others identified by Ayo Harrington of that group
3. Individual advocates who had been specifically identified by the director of OPEI, Dr. Sherrill Wilson
4. The Committee of the Descendants of the Ancestral Afrikan Burial Ground.

Public Meetings

After the five listening sessions, members of the NPS planning team met in April 2004 with the GSA, with citizens who had attended the listening sessions, and with other interested parties and organizations, to plan upcoming public meetings.



Determining Meaning, Significance, and Character

Two meetings were held in May, one in Brooklyn at Medgar Evers College on May 25, 2004, and the other in Harlem at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture the next day. Each meeting's objective was to elicit information that would convey what the African Burial Ground meant to the community, what it should reveal to visitors, what stories should be interpreted, and what design characteristics should be reflected in facilities. The following sentiments were gleaned from comments the public shared with us during those meetings.

- Acknowledge that the ancestors were the first and most prominent “commodities” traded on Wall Street.
- That people managed to hold onto their traditions despite all the abuse—perseverance by ancestors to hold onto their cultures despite the abuse imposed upon them by the United States government.
- Show how New York City has changed over time and the major contributions

Participants discuss the meaning and significance of the African Burial Ground at a May 2004 NPS public meeting held at the Schomburg Center.

Courtesy of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture



Participants at a GSA/NPS forum at Medgar Evers College in June 2004 view the five final designs for the African Burial Ground memorial.

Courtesy of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture

Africans made to New York and New Amsterdam. They were not just “beasts of burden,” but made many contributions to America.

- History has been buried and is not open, and everyone doesn’t know it. The people that wrote history did not include the ancestors and their histories, and got history wrong. The ancestors were excluded.
- Desecration of the graves is a horror understood by many cultures—how the graves and people in them could be treated as if they were nothing, in the way they were dug up.
- How they were treated when they were living was echoed in how they were treated after they died and when they were dug up.
- Anger and rage that open the door to other factors. With this you will go and seek the answers you are looking for. The site should be a place for dialogue, healing, prayer.
- Remembrance—something that touches the spirit of every person who visits.

- It was a crime against humanity.
- Faith, joy, hope for the future.

Memorial Forums

NPS and GSA conducted five public forums in 2004 from June 12 through 17—one in each of New York City’s boroughs. The forums sought an exchange of ideas, goals, and concerns that could inform the five finalist designers’ efforts to bring their initial schematic designs to a more complete state, in preparation for the final round of evaluation. Public comments by those who attended the forums and by those responding online showed a wide range of opinions about the appearance of the future memorial. Some advocated minimal treatment of the site, while others wanted to see a

prominent memorial that would prevent a once hidden history from becoming obscured again. Most important to note is that the public expressed and confirmed, time and again, at all five forums, that the memorial site must be treated as a sacred place, one that both demonstrated and required respect, dignity, and reverence. Another recurring theme was that the memorial must honor all African ancestors (not just those interred on-site), and be seen as a powerful symbolic expression of their endurance, cultural identity, and contributions to New York City and the nation.

The following comments were among those received following the June forums.

“This design is not appropriate for the African Burial Ground. The site is sacred, and I would like to see it remain as is with maybe an eternal flame and a bench that we can sit on.” (Re: Groundworks)

“It respects us. There was peace.” (Re: Eustace Pilgrim and Christopher Davis)

“This is my favorite design by far. I think this project allows for all people, young and old. I can see happy moments (cele-



bration) and time of reflection. All seven elements are essential—maybe more space for kids.” (Re: AARRIS Architects)

“No, because of the artist. The wall should reflect the kings and queens of Africa, then ships, achievements, and the dove (freedom). The death and life of the slaves will let people of today see our free spirit when they leave the burial ground site. ...no feeling for slaves.” (Re: Joseph DePace Architect)

“Nothing! Nothing! Nothing must be built on the burial site! It must be preserved as a cemetery!” (General response to any design)

“Nice park, but not for this ground. It’s like making a park on top of a cemetery—just add a few swings. I can see it now: eating, drinking, and garbage. Not at this cemetery. I like the running water along the walls, maybe.” (Re: McKissack and McKissack)

Visitor Experience Workshops

The first of two Visitor Experience Workshops was held on August 6, 2004, at 290 Broadway in New York City. Twenty-eight persons attended, including OPEI staff, the NPS team, and other NPS professionals with expertise in such areas as African American history sites, urban parks, park operations, partnership parks, education, archeology, the arts, and other related disciplines. Also participating were representatives from New York City public history institutions that have experience with the African Burial Ground.

Built on previous work (public meetings, surveys, reports, recommendations), discussions centered on four main areas: the identification of potential targeted audiences, challenges to interpretation, concepts and ideas for developing interpretive themes, and desired visitor experience. Options were discussed and priorities were identified about specific audiences, concepts for themes, desired tone and approach, and desired visi-

tor experiences. The discussions informed recommendations and options that appear in Chapter 7 of this report.

A significant finding was that the space on the first floor of 290 Broadway (two thousand-plus square feet), although in desirable proximity to the memorial site, is plagued with so many access, security, and visitor-support barriers that its use seems infeasible, except perhaps for small groups who make prearranged visits during Monday through Friday business hours. If desired future audiences include drop-in visitors, larger groups, and/or weekend access, other, more appro-

Roundtable Comments

“... the story of forgetfulness. Forgetfulness is a political strategy to control history. You remember things that are politically advantageous and forget things that aren’t.”

“...it’s important to keep in mind that the physical construction and the economic development of New York City, which was a major international shipping port during this time, would not have been possible without the heavy intensive labor of Africans.”

“First and foremost, African people pursued their own interests; they did not see themselves as someone else’s property. They saw themselves as human beings. And what we hope in our report is that we show that more than anything; these are human beings who tried to live as human beings, despite the fact that there were these people trying to keep them in a subordinate position and trying to keep them as property.”

“Involuntary migration to the New World and especially to the Northeast and to New York City is critically important. We’re a country of immigrants, but involuntary immigration is a very different experience.”

“The other part of the story is that they found ways to survive in spite of the fact that all of this was happening to them. They did that by empha-



Roundtable Comments (Continued)

sizing their humanity. We can't not talk about all of those things. It's there in the remains."

"...the history and the skeletal biology really speak to each other, so we understand that the politics and the economics of what was happening in the slave trade actually directly impacts what was going on in New York."

"The African Burial Ground supplies irrefutable evidence of the presence of slaves in New York City and then the country. The 1701 census—40 per cent of households included enslaved Africans. So that almost half of the households within New York City included slaveholders."

"The African Burial Ground can be a beacon, not only to tell the story of the Africans in New York City, but in Delaware, in Maryland, from Albany to Argentina—and that's primarily that they are 'colony builders.' That, to me, would be the greatest hope: that a child or adult would think of the word slave as being synonymous with colony builder."

"Looking at the material goods and trying to understand the kinds of economic activities these people were participating in leads you to some very important questions about the mobility of Africans, connections among Africans in northern urban areas and southern areas, seamen who spent time in New York but had traveled the world. Looking at the material culture can lead you to [understand] ... context."

"We approached this from a diasporic perspective because we understood the New York Africans didn't just spring up in New York; they came from elsewhere [originally].... What we discovered was a great deal of diversity in terms of the origins of black people, and not just in origins, but in experiences as well. ...they are bringing certain cultural differences with them. So the task they had in terms of their humanness as opposed to their status as property was to try to blend these different cultural practices and become one people."

priate, locations for interpretive facilities must be sought.

The second Visitor Experience Workshop was with the OPEI volunteers on September 18, 2004, at the OPEI offices at 201 Varick Street. Eighteen persons attended. The volunteers were asked to describe desired audiences, the desired visitor experience, and challenges to interpretation. They offered ideas for promoting the future interpretive program and expressed frustration about the process and length of time it has taken to have the African Burial Ground recognized. Volunteer comments echoed those expressed in other forums.

Research Roundtable

The roundtable held in Philadelphia November 5–6, 2004, engaged 15 scholars in discussions about current scholarship on the African Burial Ground. The roundtable included members of the Howard University research team that has been studying the site for the last 12 years, as well as other scholars in the fields of physical anthropology, archeology, and African American history. The Howard University team presented synopses of their history, skeletal biology, and archeological reports. In several panels, Howard researchers who had studied the specific site were teamed with scholars who have studied African and African American history and anthropology as they relate to early America. Each panel of scholars addressed one or two specific questions so that a range of scholarship related to the site could be discussed. The questions ranged from the role African Americans played in the development of New York City to ways in which the African Burial Ground can help tell the story of African contributions to New York City. The panelists considered what stories are best illustrated by the burial ground, the meanings the site has for people today, and the reasons it is nationally and internationally significant.