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Editorial Introduction

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The Power of the People—Development, Archaeology, and Community Involvement

In the late 1980s, during the construction of a General Services Administration (GSA) building at the corner of Duane and Elk Streets in Lower Manhattan, human burials were discovered. Over the next two years, archaeologists and physical anthropologists excavated the remains of 419 individuals, almost half of whom were children under the age of 12. Denied access to the Trinity Church cemetery, archival research and archaeological investigations revealed that during the 17th and 18th centuries, free and enslaved Africans were buried in the over six acre burial ground in lower Manhattan outside the boundaries of the settlement of New Amsterdam, present day New York. Over the decades, the unmarked graves were obscured by subsequent development and landfill.

Almost immediately, controversy arose over the investigations; questions surrounding the respect for and study of the human remains became the focus of a large number of members of the descendant community. Issues of desecration of sacred space and the thorny topic of slave owning in New York were also raised in discussions surrounding the site. According to community archaeologist Cheryl LaRoche and physical anthropologist Michael Blakey (1997: 89), the descendant community was keenly aware of the parallels between the mishandling of the bones from the site and the racial realities in which they existed. Local New Yorkers, clergy, politicians, representatives of the African descendants, archaeologists, scientists, and historians united to halt the excavation, which was being conducted as part of a Memorandum of Agreement between the GSA and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation fulfilling the Section 106 requirements of the National Historic Preservation Act. Public education, transparency, and outreach became integral elements of the project. Concerned citizens demanded to know what was going on at the site and with the human remains. Continued community activism and 24 hour site vigils resulted in Congress acting to temporarily stop construction in 1992. The intent of the concerned communities was not to prevent all scientific investigation, but instead to ensure that the archaeology being conducted (at the time by archaeologists from a cultural resource management firm) was carried out by individuals qualified to direct research on an important African-American bioarchaeological site. Congress, in halting both the investigations and the development of the site, sought community involvement in planning a memorial to share the space with the GSA—a negotiated compromise over the treatment and development of this sacred space.

Today, mention of the African Burial Ground (ABG) brings to mind issues of community involvement—both positive and negative. It was the power of the people at the ABG that resulted in the 1993 listing of the site on the National Register of Historic Places. Continued community involvement ultimately resulted in the cooperative agreement between the GSA and the National Park Service, which oversees the monument and visitor’s center. In February of 2006, then President George W. Bush took the bold step of officially proclaiming the African Burial Ground National Monument—a power afforded to him under the American Antiquities Act of 1906. The visitor’s center, which is housed inside the Federal Building, opened to much acclaim and ceremony in February of 2010. At the opening, New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg acknowledged that the excavations had revealed “one of the most uncomfortable and tragic truths in our city’s history. For two centuries, slavery was widespread in New York” (BBC 2010). In a review of the monument, New York Times cultural critic Edward Rothstein (2010) stated: “Among the scars left by the heritage of slavery, one of the greatest is an absence: where are the memorials, cemeteries, architectural structures or sturdy sanctuaries that typically provide the ground for a people’s memory?” Not only is the African Burial Ground National Monument a reminder of slavery, it serves as testament to the power of the people in creating a site of remembrance.

In Natalie Swanepoel’s following article, she brings to our attention the power of the people in preserving and interpreting heritage sites in Gwollu, northern Ghana. As with the communities in New York City, communities in Gwollu have tackled the competing demands of development and the preservation of heritage in an urban landscape. Both examples highlight the value of archaeological research in
understanding the past and present uses of urban landscapes. Of specific interest is the important place of the Gwollu Slave Defense Wall in heritage tourism and traditional brickmaking. Archaeological survey confirms the existence of slave-raiding establishments associated with the wall. Tourism associated with the slave trade is an increasingly important aspect of the Ghanaian economy, but as Swanepoel demonstrates, there is local tension between those who advocate for the preservation of a site associated with slavery (e.g. the Slave Defense Wall) and those who mine the wall for the rich (archaeological) soil used for traditional brickmaking. Further complicating the situation are ancestral ties to the land and questions of access to soil. Similar to the example of the ABG, Swanepoel describes how community involvement and outreach are critical in heritage planning for all stakeholders, especially in situations where traditional practices may negatively impact places of heritage. Community objectives and aims can affect the cultural landscape—both positively and negatively. She makes a clear case for why (and how) archaeological research must be interdisciplinary, calling not only on archaeologists, but also on experts from the fields of urban planning and community outreach.

References