



The African Burial Ground in New York City: Memory, Spirituality, and Space (New York State Series)

Andrea E. Frohne

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In 1991, archaeologists in lower Manhattan unearthed a stunning discovery. Buried for more than 200 years was a communal cemetery containing the remains of up to 20,000 people. At roughly 6.6 acres, the African Burial Ground is the largest and earliest known burial space of African descendants in North America. In the years that followed its discovery, citizens and activists fought tirelessly to demand respectful treatment of eighteenth-century funerary remains and sacred ancestors. After more than a decade of political battle-on local and national levels-and scientific research at Howard University, the remains were eventually reburied on the site in 2003. Capturing the varied perspectives and the emotional tenor of the time, Frohne narrates the story of the African Burial Ground and the controversies surrounding urban commemoration. She analyzes both its colonial and contemporary representations, drawing on colonial-era maps, prints, and land surveys to illuminate the forgotten and hidden visual histories of a mostly enslaved population buried in the African Burial Ground. Today, personal offerings and commemorative artworks, many of which incorporate traditional African and diasporic arts and religions, pay tribute to the ancestors and the sacred space. Tracing the history and identity of the area from a forgotten site to a contested and negotiated space, Frohne situates the burial ground within the context of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century race relations in New York City to reveal its enduring presence as a spiritual place. Finally, she illustrates visually, spiritually, and spatially the historic and contemporary formation of a New York City African diaspora in relation to the African Burial Ground.

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