Chapter 4

ELEMENTS UNDERLYING INTERPRETATION AND EDUCATION

This chapter serves as the foundation for those that follow. It includes a suggested mission statement for use by the managers of the site, the reasons for the African Burial Ground's national significance, the basic elements and values of the site, suggested primary interpretive themes, and other factors that influence planning and operations. These underlying elements, as a whole, are suggested as the touchstone for future management policies and actions, ensuring consistency and assisting in prioritizing goals.

The following underlying elements have been synthesized by the NPS technical assistance team from the comments of those gathered at the respective public meetings and by other comment methods, from the literature and scholarly research on the subject, and from a review of the existing legal requirements that relate to the African Burial Ground.

Mission Statement

The African Burial Ground will, of course, always remain the final resting place of New York inhabitants who contributed to the development of the city in another time. The following suggested mission statement provides the basis for honoring and learning about those interred and the times in which they lived. The statement contains the fundamental criteria against which the appropriateness of all future planning, operational decisions, and actions can be tested. Although any mission statement should generally remain constant over the long term, it may evolve as a result of new discoveries, research, and scholarship. The one presented here is an expression of what was heard during public meetings and by other comment methods as shared assumptions about the burial ground's role as a site of national significance and international importance.

Following is the suggested mission statement.

Preserve and Protect Resources and Values

The fundamental mission of the African Burial Ground is to preserve and protect the nationally significant resources and the dynamic cultural and community values associated with the African Burying Ground National Historic Landmark. The basic principle guiding management of this hallowed ground is to bring forth and honor the memory of those who are buried in this historic place.

Provide Knowledge

Multidisciplinary activities related to the African Burial Ground will heighten understanding, increase needed dialogue, re-educate society, and publicly acknowledge the importance of a rich variety of subjects, including:

- the history of the enslavement of Africans
- the history of northern slavery and denial of human freedom in New York, and by extension, the northern states
- the stories of resistance to the inhumanity and brutality of enslavement
- the resilience of African cultural practices
- the lives and circumstances of early Africans and African Americans in New York City, including social mores and burial customs and traditions
- the contributions of Africans and Americans of African descent to the development of New York City
- the relevance of the African Burial Ground and the people of that time to the history of this nation and contemporary society
- the struggle of today's community activists to preserve, protect, remember, and celebrate the African Burial Ground and those interred there.

Connect and reconnect the past and present
The African Burial Ground will strengthen descendant connections to the ancestral past by offering a place of pilgrimage, remembrance, reflection, and celebration.

Sustain and expand knowledge
The African Burial Ground will be a repository of scientific and scholarly knowledge. It will encourage ongoing and new research and dialogue about the site and its history, preservation, and interpretation.

Lead
The African Burial Ground will serve as a model of research, preservation, interpretation, and management of a sacred site and burial ground.

Partner / Build coalitions
The African Burial Ground will seek collaboration with city, regional, national, and international organizations and sites to promote research, understanding, and dialogue on enslavement and resistance to enslavement, as well as on the preservation and treatment of comparable sacred sites and burial grounds within New York City and beyond.

Significance

Statements of significance clearly state why, within a national and international context, the site's resources and values are important enough to warrant recognition and preservation. They describe the factual rationale for national recognition and provide a foundation for the creation of primary interpretive themes.

Based on scholars and reports, significance statements document the findings of comparative analysis with such terms as "largest collection," "most diverse representation," "possessing the greatest integrity," "oldest," and "best remaining example." The main criterion is that the information base be broad enough to support statements of relative significance within a national context (and regional or global, if appropriate). As with the mission, our understanding of the significance of the resource may evolve over time as a result of major new scientific discoveries, scholarship, or legislation.

The suggested significance statement here consolidates those from many sources, including:

- National Historic Landmark Nomination (1993)

Excavation at the African Burial Ground, 1991.
Courtesy of U.S. General Services Administration

Artifacts such as buttons, beads, pins, and cuff links were found during excavation.
Courtesy of U.S. General Services Administration

- Federal Steering Committee Report (1993)
- Surveys conducted by Peggy King-Jorde for the General Services Administration (1998)
- Comments received from the public during the NPS planning process (2004)
- Comments by various subject-matter experts from the Howard University research team (2004)
- Final research reports on history and skeletal biology produced by Howard University (2004).

The following factors make the African Burial Ground nationally significant:

Size and scope
As the final resting place for thousands of Africans in New York, the eighteenth-century African Burial Ground may well be the largest, earliest, and only known and preserved urban African burying ground.

Potential for expanding scientific knowledge
The African Burial Ground has unprecedented potential to yield scientific and cultural information about the lives of Africans and African Americans in an eighteenth-century urban North American context. The human remains of the burial ground are from the earliest populations of Africans in America (believed to be the first population of remains to have undergone a careful scientific excavation and examination), which is expected to lead to development of a significant baseline biological profile of the first generations of the African Diaspora in North

America. The site reveals significant new knowledge on African heritage, customs, and sacred rituals.

Spiritual connection of past to present
As the final resting place for thousands of Africans who lived, labored, and died in colonial New York, the African Burial Ground is a tangible and enduring spiritual memorial, strengthening the connection between contemporary Americans of African descent and their forebears who were enslaved in eighteenth-century New York. The African Burial Ground is irrefutable testimony to the suffering of the original Africans in New York and underscores the magnitude of their contribution to the city. It is a testimony to the perseverance of their descendants and others in protecting and celebrating that heritage.

Insights on northern enslavement and international trade
Although American slavery has been the subject of a vast historical literature, slave communities in the North have received less attention than those in the South, and the focus has been on the relationship between the New York mercantile class and the raw materials produced by slave labor plantations in the South. The research findings that are associated with the African Burial Ground provide a more comprehensive and irrefutable view of the direct role of enslaved peoples in the history and growth of New York City, and by extension, the United States. The findings highlight New York's role as a major Northern shipping point in the Atlantic slave trading system, with an economy that depended on the productivity of slave labor to function and to supplement its pool of skilled craftspersons.

Insights on the history of New York and the United States
The African Burial Ground's existence helps provide the truth to history by documenting the widespread enslavement of Africans in New York and the North; it presents a rare opportunity to reconstruct the lives and conditions experienced by those enslaved. The history of the site underscores the systemic denial by European Americans of the importance of the contributions of African American men, women, and children to the development of New York City and to the economic foundations of the United States.

Unique potential to expand cultural understanding of New York and the nation
Plans to mark the burial site with a memorial, open new interpretive facilities, and host commemorative cultural events, and the presence of related artistic works that have been placed in 290 Broadway, collectively expand the nature of the multicultural milieu of New York City.

Role in community mobilization and expression of cultural identity
The African Burial Ground is an important catalyst for community organization and action. It is the embodiment of a common heritage and identity for Americans of African descent who have come together to preserve and respect this hallowed plot of land as sacred ground.

Basic Elements and Values

Certain resources and values are those determined to be fundamental to achieving the mission of a park or other preserved area. Identifying the African Burial Ground's basic elements and values helps ensure that all planning is focused on what is most important about the site and its history.

Resources

- The archaeological site designated as the African Burying Ground National Historic Landmark, including its features, human remains and associated artifacts

- The memorial site east of the federal building at 290 Broadway, where there are between 200 and 300 burials within the backfilled footprint of the cancelled four-story pavilion and where the remains of 419 individuals were reinterred in October 2003

- The archives, artifacts, and bioskeletal study samples associated with the GSA

African Burial Ground Project

- The memorial that is constructed at the site

Values

- The spiritual focus, contemplative nature, and celebrative commemoration of the place and its transcendent power

Suggested Themes

Although many professional disciplines use the term theme, interpretive themes take a particular form and consist of specific elements that together communicate the core concepts and messages intended for audiences to understand and explore. They are derived from a site's mission and capture the essence of a site's significance. Interpretive themes are descriptive statements that inspire connections to resource meanings. They do this by expressing the relevant ideas, meanings, concepts, beliefs, and values that support increased audience understanding and appreciation of the site's resources, which are the desired interpretive outcomes.

Interpretive themes link universal human experiences that transcend time and culture (intangibles) with a site's stories and its tangible resources. Well-conceived themes embody broad concepts, open minds to new ideas, introduce multiple points of view, and encourage audiences to discover ideas that have relevance to their own lives. These themes help answer the basic questions, "So what?" and "What does this have to do with me?" A range of topics and stories related to a site's meaning and significance can illustrate a particular theme.

After a review of the history of the African Burial Ground, many public meetings, and interviews, three major suggested interpretive themes were developed by the NPS technical assistance team for the African Burial Ground. (These themes are explored in depth in Chapter 7 of this report.)

Rediscovery of the Burials Reshapes History Theme: *Rediscovery of the African Burial Ground demands that history be retold and forever altered by a more complete understanding of the African Diaspora, the scope of efforts to enslave Africans, the nature of resistance to dehumanization, and the role played by Africans and Americans of African descent in building New York City and shaping its culture.*

Struggle for Human Rights Theme: *The African Burial Ground demonstrates how individuals, singly and collectively, can create lives that transcend the inhumanity of forced immigration and enslavement, the burdens of the harshest labor, and the repression of cherished cultural and societal practices.*

Treatment of Sacred Sites—Sankofa and Scholarship Theme: *Guided by the spirit of Sankofa (a West African Akan concept and symbol that exhorts us to "learn from the past to prepare for the future"), efforts to preserve, study, and commemorate the African Burial Ground have triggered a vigorous activism and dialogue on the treatment of sacred sites, ancestral remains, and sites of conscience in New York City and around the globe.*

Other Factors: National Historic Landmark Status

Decision makers should always be aware of special mandates when establishing a direction for the management of a culturally significant resource, because such mandates further define what is appropriate, and they could potentially conflict with the mission and significance of the site. The major mandate affecting the African Burial Ground is its status as a National Historic Landmark (NHL).

Because the African Burial Ground is a prominent case before the Advisory Council for Historic Preservation (ACHP), flowing

from its responsibilities under the Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (HPA), a brief discussion of the HPA and GSA's Memorandum of Agreement with the ACHP follows.

The purpose of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, is to preserve, protect, and maintain the historical and cultural heritage of our nation for the present and future enjoyment of the public. The act sets forth certain responsibilities for those entrusted with stewardship of NHLs. Section 106 of this act states that the head of a federal agency, having direct or indirect jurisdiction over any federal or federally funded project in any state, and the head of a federal department with authority to grant license must, before the onset of the project, take into account the effects on any district, site, building, or structure that is included in, or eligible for inclusion in, the National Register. This condition must be considered before any federal monies are expended for a project. The head of a federal agency must also allow for comments to be made by the Advisory Council for Historic Preservation in regard to the project.

The African Burial Ground is a National Historic Landmark (established under the Historic Sites Act of 1935) and is on the National Register of Historic Places. The 1991 Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) between the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation and GSA required GSA to:

1. develop and implement a research design for the burial ground and other archeological sites within the project area

2. sensitively remove all exposed human remains

3. analyze the disturbed human remains and associated grave artifacts

4. re-inter the human remains and associated grave artifacts

5. develop a memorial, interpretive site, and public outreach program.

Additionally, GSA was required to submit quarterly reports to ACHP and the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission summarizing actions taken to comply with the amended MOA.

Some of these obligations have been met, and others proceed toward conclusion. Under any proposed management alternative, other than continuing GSA management of the site, however, a new or amended memorandum of agreement with ACHP would be advisable, if not required.