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Bones reveal little-known tale of New York slaves

February 12, 1998
Web posted at: 2:30 p.m. EST (1930 GMT)

From Correspondent
[Ann Kellan](#)

NEW YORK (CNN) -- Far beneath the busy cityscape of New York's lower Manhattan lies a centuries-old cemetery. The burial ground, discovered in 1991 by construction workers, contains more than 400 remains of what is believed to be the first group of African slaves brought to the city. It also tells a little-known story of early New York.

The bones, almost pristine despite being buried for more than 200 years, represent the emergence of African-American culture in the United States, according to [Dr. Warren Perry](#), an archeologist for the African Burial Project. (🔊) 153K/13 sec. [AIFF](#) or [WAV](#) sound)

[Dr. Michael Blakey](#), a biological anthropologist from Howard University, says the bones also reveal a great deal about who the slaves were and offer hints of where they came from. (🔊) 136K/11 sec. [AIFF](#) or [WAV](#) sound)



Despite being buried for over 200 years, the bones are in almost pristine condition

And while most people think of slavery as having been concentrated in rural or the Southern parts of the country, Edna Medford of the Historical Component says New York had a significant slave population during the 18th century.

[Watch the full report, as seen on CNN](#)

 [2 min. 15 sec. V Xtreme video](#)

Scientists hope the bones will shed new light on the lives of enslaved Africans during the Colonial period.

Blakey says the bones have already revealed that the African slaves were probably involved in a range of activities, helping to transform New York into a bustling seaport.

The bones show the hardships the Africans faced the moment they stepped off the slave ships; in some cases they literally were worked to death.

CNN's Ann Kellan reports

"You have so many individuals who have trauma or injury to the bone, broken neck bones because they were forced to do that kind of labor," says [Ena Fox](#) of Howard University.



[832 K / 22 sec. / 160x120](#)

QuickTime movie

As Blakey demonstrates how the knee bones work, he tells of the enlarged muscles or torn ligaments the slaves would have experienced. ( 213K/18 sec. [AIFF](#) or [WAV](#) sound) He says half of the populations died before they became teen-agers; others died within the first two years of their arrival.

Fox, who's been collecting data from the teeth that were found, says defects in the tooth enamel were caused by malnutrition.

burial site



African burial ground

Further examination of the bones and teeth reveal Africans who were enslaved as children and then shipped here had more cases of metabolic illness and malnutrition than children who spent their childhood in Africa and later died as

adults.

Through the research of artifacts and further DNA studies, scientists hope to trace the slaves' origins back to the particular countries they came from on the African continent.

Once that is done, the remains of the enslaved will be returned to the earth and a portion of the original burial ground will be set aside as a lasting memorial.



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