

How To Be American: A Podcast by the Tenement Museum

Season 2, Episode 3: Burial Grounds

“They say that freedom is a constant struggle...they say that freedom is a constant struggle... they say that freedom is a constant struggle...get on a board boy, get on a board...”

- Carl Johnson, Tenement Talk attendee, October 2019 Black Placemaking event.

[Carl signing fades down]

[Reflective music]

Amanda Adler Brennan: This is Carl Johnson.

Johnson attended an event at the Tenement Museum on the evening of October 17th, 2019. It was called Black Placemaking: Reinterpreting Lower East Side History.

The event was about the exclusion of black experiences and community building from public memory over the course of American History...how the absence of dedicated place names, memorials and physical sites can render their presence invisible from certain neighborhoods, or even cities. And this is an exclusion that reinforces the existing order of how Black History is interpreted in this country.

Memory is such a tricky thing. How we recall American History—the way it’s recorded, taught and told from one generation to the next...along the way, stories are sometimes forgotten. Other times, they’re willfully ignored. Before you know it, critical parts of stories, its characters—well...they’re erased.

When history is forgotten or hidden...how do we make it whole?

That takes me back to Carl Johnson. In a room full of strangers, he stood up and sang to another member of the audience, who asked the panelists: “How do we be resilient...how do we interpret our struggle, when there are things that we don’t see?”

It was a mic-drop kind of moment when Johnson answered with a song, and not just any song. He sang a Freedom Song.

Freedom songs expressed sorrow, joy, courage, and unity—embodying the struggle of enslavement, and the determination to overcome oppression since the earliest colonies, and the founding of our nation. After the abolition of slavery in 1865, through Jim Crow

and the Civil rights Movement these songs continued to be anthems that celebrated Black heritage and resilience.

In 1964, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, “the songs add hope to our determination that we shall overcome, Black and white together, we shall overcome someday.”

In many ways, freedom songs help us recall the failures of our society—slavery, segregation, and more... But they also remind us of the hard-fought achievements in Black history, the ones that bring us closer to social equality. These powerful songs and other stories help fill the gaps in our collective memory of American History.

And...there are a lot of gaps that need to be filled.

Carl’s singing and the history that the panelists shared brought to mind what’s missing from New York City’s collective memory.

When we talk about Black History in New York, we mostly think back to the Harlem Renaissance, starting in the 1920s. But as it was a Renaissance, then it would follow there was a time before that rebirth.

And, there was. Not just for Harlem itself, but for the black community who would migrate there, and make that neighborhood their home.

Why don’t we acknowledge or talk more about 18th and early 19th century Black History in New York? Where did Black New Yorkers begin to build communities in Lower Manhattan?

What happened to their stories, their history of migration in this city? Where are their monuments and memorials, historic houses and landmarks?

[HTBA music theme]

This is How To Be American, where from New York’s Lower East Side, we explore the history of immigration and migration in America. We share the stories of migrants and refugees, and everyone in-between...it’s the past, present, and future of becoming American.

From the Tenement Museum, I’m Amanda Adler Brennan.

[HTBA theme fades out]

[fade up woman speaking at a public event]

“So I want to highlight some of these sites...an important thing about this tour to get visitors to see buildings where they may pass by...where black history is hidden or where it’s right there and they just don’t know...”

Lauren O’Brien – Black Placemaking Event

[fade out Lauren as she continues to talk]

[urious music, upbeat - mid energy]

That’s Lauren O’Brien.

Lauren was one of the keynote speakers at the same October 17th event, just a few feet away from Carl when he sang. Like others in the room, she was visibly moved.

Reclaiming forgotten history and how that preservation is addressed in New York, is part of the work Lauren’s doing for the Tenement Museum. Her research is important—and really interesting...

So, I invited Lauren to the studio to talk about the work she’s doing, and more about the history she shared on the night of that event.

Lauren O’Brien:

My name is Lauren O'Brien. I am the lead project scholar for the Black Migrations tour. In short, that means that I am the lead researcher, or the primary researcher, that is uncovering the history of Black migration, or African American experience on the Lower East Side in Lower Manhattan, and then designing a walking tour for that history.

Amanda Adler Brennan:

Lauren, your title gives some of this away, but what have you been working on for the museum?

Lauren O'Brien:

Looking broadly at history of the Black experience on the Lower East Side, but also Lower Manhattan. In addition to looking at a site-specific place history of where we can see examples of Black institutions or communities, also looking at the Tenement Museum's personal history of telling Black stories. We were surprised, in looking at some of the institutional records, that there was always a mission to talk about the Black

experience within the history of the Lower East Side, but this has been the first time in, I would say a decade or two, where it's really been prioritized again.

Amanda Adler Brennan:

What's been the genesis of this project? Why did the museum partner with you and other scholars to bring Black migration stories to life within the new tour?

Lauren O'Brien:

A question that has been presented to a lot of educators that are giving tours are, where is the Black people? That has been a common question throughout the years. That, as an addition to a partnership with the National Parks Service, presented an opportunity to work with the African Burial Ground. This is an opportunity to share visitorship. Bringing audiences that are flocking to the Tenement Museum to Chambers Street, but also not only doing that, but showing the parallels and the shared history.

Amanda Adler Brennan: The tour will start at the Tenement Museum, weaving in and out of the streets of Lower Manhattan. Visitors will stop at a row house that dates back to the 1800s and historic sites like the African Burial Ground, which is managed by the National Parks Service. On the tour, Museum Educators lead the storytelling and share histories that span centuries of black migration and settlement, honing in on the history of Black residents of Old New York.

Lauren O'Brien:

From, the start of Manhattan, or what we know of New York, there's always been a Black population, but they have always been ... well, in the beginnings, a minority, a small group. Even when the Dutch first came, they brought about a dozen enslaved Africans from different parts of the Atlantic world. We see from the period of enslavement that there was a Black settlement or community that was part of the Lower East Side, right around the corner from the Tenement Museum. This is the 17th century, so we can say that there were Black people on the Lower East Side, as well as Lower Manhattan, since then.

Throughout time, from various forces, there has been a lot of movement and migration to different parts of the city, as the city has expanded. It grew with the Great Migration, and so you're thinking the 20s, but again, they've always been a very small minority. I think that's also why you don't often associate the Lower East Side or Lower Manhattan with the Black community.

Amanda Adler Brennan: The Great Migration was the relocation of more than 6 million African Americans from the rural South to the North, including the Midwest and West of the United States from 1916...up until 1970. The early part of this migration was driven by the results of the Civil War and emancipation, but later generations of African Americans headed to northern cities like New York for a number of reasons. Often to escape segregationist laws, fleeing from the constant threat of racial violence...to find work and create communities.

For those who journeyed to New York, and for African Americans living in New York before emancipation, their motivation to build a home; find a place—is a common theme in stories of immigration and migration.

Lauren O'Brien:

I think that's one of the surprises, some of the parallels—that Black migrants are exploring in relation to their European neighbors are, what does it mean to be American, and what does it mean to be a New Yorker? They are exploring this and defining this for themselves through creating institutions, staking their claim on land. Either that's through moving in different areas, again, setting up maybe different community organizations or schools and churches.

Amanda Adler Brennan:

How does the new tour explore these stories of Black migration?

Lauren O'Brien:

One thing that I was very intentional about in designing this story is that it's not seen as an outlier to the stories already being told. Part of the process in writing this tour was to be immersed in all of the walking tours, and the building tours that the museum has already going, so that it is, although a different story that is specific to the Black experience, it's still sharing common themes, exploring a similar narrative, and the similar loved parts about tours, where it's focusing on a family, or a personal narrative to tell a larger story, so that visitors can connect with that person, and get more awareness of who was living in that time, and so they can speak for themselves and it's not just us speaking for them.

Amanda Adler Brennan: Historically, pockets of Lower Manhattan and the Lower East Side are characterized as European immigrant neighborhoods—the Five Points for example, was primarily known as an Irish neighborhood in the mid-19th century. But the tour explores the stories of Black residents that shake up that history. How do we know Black residents settled these areas as well?

Lauren O'Brien:

If anyone catches themselves around the corner of Worth and Baxter Street, that was kind of the center of the Five Points. Why I pointed that out is that location is very close in proximity to the African Burial Ground. We know that, because the African Burial Ground was right there where there was also Collect Pond, that there were Black inhabitants and Black settlement in that area.

Amanda Adler Brennan: If you walk down to what was Collect Pond today you'll find a small city park lined with trees and benches that centers around two geometric shaped pools. But in the city's early days that pond was its main water supply for nearly 200 years; the waterway was over five acres—that's 4 times bigger than a football field.

From the 1690s to the late 1700s, the original pond was contaminated by waste from nearby developments and businesses—like slaughterhouses, breweries, tanneries, and other local shops.

The pond was eventually filled and leveled in 1811. But even after leveling, the ground continued to recede. Waste pooled to the surface—a smelly mixture of animal and human excrement along with other sewage.

Although this was clearly not the most desirable spot to settle, that didn't mean people didn't try to live near, or build on top of the filled pond.

As Lauren noted, one thing that's significant about this area were the settlements created by Black residents there. The area was accessible to Black New Yorkers, and it was a neighborhood where there was a possibility for community building. This wasn't just any ordinary place...this site would become one of the most infamous neighborhoods in the city's history, known for the five-pointed intersection of its three streets.

Lauren O'Brien:

One of the first areas that were developed, or where free Black people were starting to settle, was the Five Points. They were living there while enslavement was still going on. It was also a space where you start to see Black institutions growing. One of those is the African Free School, and so with that, you also see social mobility. You start to see a different class growing within the Black experience. You not only have free Black people, but now you have an elite class that's working, and they're continuing to build out this neighborhood.

Amanda Adler Brennan: Lauren is referring to the Elite Class, who have been all but forgotten from history. They were a group of distinguished African-American leaders, who despite discrimination, achieved success in trade, business, and various professions during the Civil War, Draft Riots, and Jim Crow era.

The Black Elite are also the subject of *Black Gotham*, a book by Carla Peterson, a professor at the University of Maryland, College Park. She was also a speaker at our October event, joined by Lauren and others.

In her book, Peterson shares her own family's history, and tells the story of how Elites and other free Black people began to build institutions that served *their* community. Establishing themselves as prominent New Yorkers in the heart of the Five Points neighborhood, years before the 20th Century.

Lauren O'Brien:

Prior to the Irish, or even as they're migrating to New York, you see a community that's starting to build churches, building mutual support organizations, as well as living in different homes, and really setting up shop, or placemaking.

Amanda Adler Brennan: Throughout my conversation with Lauren, she used the term Placemaking.

Lauren O'Brien:

Place is supposed to be space, a geographical space that is embedded with meaning. That could be a social, cultural, political kind of meaning. Where you see communities all over the world, they may oftentimes go to a place that either maybe they have been disenfranchised, and they have been forced to go to that location, or maybe it's a location that no one wants at all, and they decide to refurbish or make it theirs, but again, staking claim and creating something aligned with their identity or their community, and making it home. In the way that we have been re-imagining, or imagining, this story about Black migrations tour is to think about the ways that Black New Yorkers have gone to different parts of the city, or more specifically Lower East Side and Lower Manhattan, and created a community at a specific site. In that way, that's what I mean by placemaking.

Amanda Adler Brennan [narration]: For well-to-do white New Yorkers, the Five Points was undesirable. But by the early to mid-19th century, thousands of new immigrants were making their way to the United States. The Five Points became a place for

immigrant settlement for the same reasons that motivated free Black New Yorkers to settle the area initially.

Lauren O'Brien:

This is also why you have Irish immigrants moving into this area, because this is an area that they can afford to be in, that they can be in. The image that we do start to see, of an Irish-dominated space, is where it does demonstrate where now there is a large influx during the 19th century of Irish immigrants living and working alongside African Americans, where there is a sizable population, but they do eventually become outnumbered.

Amanda Adler Brennan [narration]: These communities coexisted in the same neighborhood, and Lauren explained that both of them faced similar social and economic obstacles.

Lauren O'Brien:

It's an interesting story because you see them being placed in the same social hierarchy, but yet not. They're working the same kind of jobs. In some ways, the Irish are ethnically stereotyped in ways that kind of mirror the way that Black stereotypes are. It is important to mention that there is definitely a difference, but they are being compared in a similar way. Some of that is the way that they are mixing with each other culturally. In some ways, people are forming families. Then there also starts to be a distinction made between these groups as well.

Amanda Adler Brennan [narration]: In political magazines and in pop culture, both the Irish and African Americans were presented in ways that made them appear less American, and...less human.

The Irish were portrayed as hot headed, old-world, drunkards who liked to fight. Similar to their African American neighbors—in propaganda they were drawn to look ape-like. Check out our show notes for an example.

But Irish Americans were considered legally "white" — they could naturalize and vote, and were considered citizens under the law.

Black New Yorkers were not.

And as the 19th Century wore on, and new immigrant groups continued to come from Europe...Irish Immigrants, for the most part, managed to establish themselves simply as

Americans. Soon, the ethnic stereotyping once reserved for the Irish...was passed on to other groups.

Lauren O'Brien:

There also starts to be a distinction made between these groups as well, now there are more studies about whiteness, or David Roediger's book that talks about how the Irish then became white. You see those forces that helped shape that, where, say, different occupations like domestic work, or different factories that were hiring African Americans are now preferring to hire Irish Americans, or Irish immigrants. Black people are being displaced from different work environments, and so you have that tension coming.

Lauren O'Brien:

In the Five Points, even the people who were successful to become Black entrepreneurs, or rent homes, oftentimes they still had white landlords, so they're still not able to build wealth or get economic security. There is a frustration where you see new incomers, or people who are starting from humble beginnings and are able to, quote-unquote, pull themselves up by their bootstraps, but this is not happening for the Black community, even though they are investing among each other, and doing all the things that they're doing. In some cases, they are becoming more educated than some of these immigrant groups, but they are still not receiving the same opportunities in any way to establish themselves as insiders in a community that many of them were born.

Amanda Adler Brennan:

At this time, would you say that there's this kind of realization that this is a losing game? That despite them being able to achieve education and all the other things that you just mentioned, that there's no way to move up in the way that they're trying to?

Lauren O'Brien:

I'm sure some people thought that way, but in looking at least at what traces that we still have, I think there was still a resilient spirit, which is inspiring to see. Despite disenfranchisement, despite discrimination, people are being creative in trying to think of alternative ways. One example is that a lot of Black women are no longer able, or not preferred anymore as domestics, and so you start to see Black women become entrepreneurs. One site that we're going to explore is a store of goods, where 100 Black women are coming together, and they create a cooperative store, a physical site too. You can see examples of people challenging these different instances of disenfranchisement, and trying to build together. You still kind of see that tradition of community and grassroots organizing amongst one another.

Amanda: What Lauren is talking about is happening at the beginning of the 19th century, sometimes even earlier. People coming together, and making a place for themselves.

There was considerable adversity, but there was also a degree of success...due in part to a “resilient spirit,” as Lauren called it.

18th and 19th century Black New Yorkers became business owners, some with White clientele. And there were Whites at this time who supported this mobility through interracial coalitions. Together, they opened orphanages, and worked with Abolitionists in 1794 to open the African Free School that Lauren mentioned earlier. The school was dedicated to educating free and enslaved children, and employing both Black and White teachers.

And even in the face of racial tension, there was evidence of intermingling between White and Black residents. In areas like the Five Points, these relationships sometimes inspired new American traditions. And the *places where* residents came together were at the center of this exchange.

Lauren O'Brien:

The Five Points is a unique place where now historians have looked over census records, and have been able to see that not only are Irish and African Americans living near each other, but in some cases they're families. We know that they're forming intimate, personal relationships with one another. They're also culturally exchanging, and one example is dance. Thinking about the tradition of tap dance growing, this is cultural exchange happening. A site like Pete Almack's, where the Five Points is famous or infamous for a lot of their dance halls, or taverns. Pete Almack's was one that happened to be owned by a Black man named Pete Williams.

Amanda Adler Brennan: Who was Pete Williams and what is Pete Almack's?

Lauren O'Brien:

Pete Almack's was this site that, because it was popular for dancing, and for both Irish and Black New Yorkers to live, it became very sensationalized. The census records report that he was listed as someone who owned lodging, so the tavern was not his first business. For him to be listed and talked about so often, that meant that he was popular, and that he was successful. We know that because he's mentioned in multiple different sources, that his business was a site to be seen.

Lauren O'Brien:

we have to remember that slavery is not abolished yet at this time, before he's really big, so that's huge to be a free Black person and you have a major business that's not only for African Americans, but that people internationally are coming to visit. Some historians are even linking it to being one of the birthplaces of tap dance, and so you have famous dancers that are coming here to compete, or to exchange different styles.

Lauren O'Brien:

Because of that, it sparked fears of miscegenation, of racial mixing. You see this in magazines, or travel novels. One of the famous ones is by Charles Dickens, where they are describing this site as illicit, kind of using ... where we know disease is rampant in this area, but using those negative connotations to talk about this space as this dark space, that's rampant with gangs, prostitution ... which, gangs and prostitution was a part of the Five Points, but we do know there were other parts ... trying to sensationalize this dance hall that was owned by this Black man as one of these sites that really cultivated these relationships that would mix the classes.

Amanda Adler Brennan [narration]: The description Lauren is referring to by Charles Dickens appears in an excerpt of *American Notes for General Circulation*, published in 1852. Dickens wrote about the “wretchedness” of the Five Points at considerable length...concluding: “All that is loathsome, drooping, and decayed is here.”

Lauren O'Brien:

An important thing that, even though these were sensationalized, and I'm sure people realized that at the time, they helped plant seeds, or encourage Irish Americans who may be trying to assimilate, to recognize that it is a bad thing to socially interact, or even to have personal relationships with Black people. They reaffirm these ideas of what is whiteness and what is Blackness, in that Black people were subordinate. These outside reports helped with the tension that was already growing, to show that you are different from one another, and that it is wrong, whatever you're doing, even though you live together and you work together, and you might enjoy partying together, that this is morally wrong, and that it's frowned upon.

Amanda: These growing tensions exploded with the Draft Riots that lasted for nearly a week in July of 1863. This was a period of unbridled violence on the streets of Lower Manhattan, and it was a turning point for the Black community of 19th century New York City.

Lauren O'Brien:

When we think about the Civil War, we often talk about it in the context of the South, or when we talk about the North, we say the North is on this leading side, we're better than the South, we're less violent, we were anti-slavery and trying to abolish it. We don't talk about the ways that, often, that the North was impacted. The draft riots that were sparked by the draft really show those tensions, and who was impacted.

What happened with the draft riots, and how it implicated a lot of Irish or immigrants, is that the draft, I would say, economically disadvantaged immigrants. If you had around 300 dollars you could pay your way out of the draft. We know if you're an immigrant, you don't have that amount of money.

Amanda Adler Brennan [narration]: The rioters were overwhelmingly white working-class men, mostly Irish or of Irish descent. Rioters resented free Black people because they were competing against them for the same jobs, and they blamed them for the draft...even the war itself. Emancipation was a driving factor in the Draft Riots.

The rioters' frustration was only compounded by the wealthier men who could afford to pay the three hundred dollar fee to get out of the draft. Accounting for inflation, that fee would be roughly \$9,200 today.

Lauren O'Brien:

The range of the men that they were getting was early 20s, they could even draft someone who was in their 30s. They were getting a sizable population of young Irish men, who would be the staples of communities. It's important to also think that they're not only drafting these men, but they're doing it and saying it's for the cause of freeing enslaved Black people. We know from just talking earlier that there's already this tension between, or growing tension, between African Americans and Irish. Not only do you feel like you're being drafted beyond your own right, but then you have to fight for people who you might feel like you're already fighting to secure jobs. For a number of Irish New Yorkers, this spurred anger.

Amanda Adler Brennan [narration]: At first, the rioting was aimed at government buildings and federal institutions, but then the rioters targeted Black residents. The attacks were random at first, but soon enough, the violence turned to the Black Elite—whose interracial activities, and success was seen as a threat to the rioters...

Looking back, the Draft Riots culminated in what is still the most racially driven and largest urban riot in American history.

Lauren O'Brien:

You had institutions like the Colored Orphanage that was targeted, because these are white New Yorkers supporting the investment or the social mobility of Black people. Then you also have the Black elite, where you have one family in particular, Albro Lyons and his family, who are targeted, where they were politically active in helping the Black community at this time. They also had ties to the Five Points, and they also had ties to the Underground Railroad. I think because publicly they had these large representations of Black success, and so they were markers that just drew more anger and resentment. That's why they were deliberately targeted by, yeah, white terrorism in that sense, in same ways that we can think about lynching in the South, or different institutions. Tulsa, Oklahoma is the biggest example of a successful, economically enfranchised community that is targeted because of that, through And. In a similar way, that's what happened in New York.

Amanda Adler Brennan:

Do we know how Pete Almack's fared during the draft riots? Were they still open at that point?

Lauren O'Brien:

We can only make assumptions about this, but in some of the personal narratives that are left behind of African Americans, that say that they happened to be protected by neighbors, or their businesses were looked over, express that they had some relationships with the Irish.

I do want to stress that they were anomalies. There was a lot of death and a lot of damage that was done, for the most part, and people were not spared. We do know there were some neighbors that did advocate ... some white neighbors that advocated for their Black neighbors, to save their properties.

Amanda:

What was the experience like for Blacks in Lower Manhattan after the draft riots?

Lauren O'Brien:

The draft riots, we know from personal narratives, as well as Black newspapers ... or I mean, we could even look at the violence, the incidents of violence that happened, that it sparked an exodus. There was already this tension and this questioning of, what does it mean to be Black and American? What does it mean to be a New Yorker? The draft riots really heightened this sense of question about place. Even those who were spared, and their businesses, they still saw the trace of that violence. These spaces were still

marked by people who were lynched, or by burned properties. It took a lot of rebuilding for the people who were there. Black New Yorkers were faced with the question of, do I rebuild here, or do I move? Even though I may not have been targeted for violence here, or even though I'm still here, there was still racism and tension that was still present.

Amanda Adler Brennan [narration]: After the Draft Riots, many Black New Yorkers relocated. Fears of more violent riots, and feeling unwelcome led many to leave the neighborhood, city...even the state.

But not everyone shared these fears. Lauren pointed to Black newspapers, like the weekly Anglo-African, that published notices ... insisting to Black New Yorkers that they have a place in the city.

Lauren O'Brien:

People are urging people either to stay and to rebuild, and that we do have a home in New York, or you're hearing people say you can live elsewhere. You do see a lot of examples of people leaving. They either leave the state, where people are going to New England or New Jersey, or they're going to other parts of the city. Those places are now where you see large Black populations, so Brooklyn, you see people going to Harlem. Even closer, you see people going to the Tenderloin District, and San Juan Hill. You see people starting to just move up.

Amanda Adler Brennan:

What were the immediate as well as the larger ramifications of the riot on the population of New York City, in general?

Lauren O'Brien:

Before the riots, in the mid-19th century, there was a sizable population of African Americans, or Black people, living in Lower Manhattan, and that dropped by 29 percent by the late 1860s. Some of this ... this is not all the draft riots. There are other forces, where New York is also changing dramatically. You have ... the train system is expanding. You have areas like Harlem being developed more, so you have more housing booming at this point. There's more of an incentive to create a community that truly is a Black community ...

A site like Harlem or Brooklyn presented an opportunity to really cultivate what was already going on in the Five Points, on a larger scale, and away from ... or hoping away from the threat of white terrorism. It gave a clean slate for a lot of people.

Amanda Adler Brennan:

At the end of the 19th century, different ideas about what New York City was and who it belonged to started to emerge. Why did this happen?

Lauren O'Brien:

Piece by piece, towards the end of the 19th century into the 20th century, parts of the Five Points are being taken by the city and being developed, where you're seeing now, where it's a lot of federal or civic type spaces, it got redeveloped completely.

Again, the Five Points, by that time it's an undesirable place. Because it's undesirable, health conditions are not as good, because the city is not taking care of them, or prioritizing it. It was one of the largest slums, and so it was easily considered a space to destroy.

Amanda Adler Brennan [narration]: As Lauren explained, it's not uncommon for a place like the Five Points to be lost to "Slum Clearance." But when an area like this is wiped from the map by redevelopment, we lose more than just a neighborhood.

Lauren O'Brien:

I think it is important to complicate the story of the draft riots, where we just hear these are two different groups that are competing with each other, and are antagonistic. It's not that simple of a story. We lose that, but we also more specifically lose early 19th century examples of Black placemaking, people obtaining space or purchasing it, which even is more remarkable. This is again at the time of, while people are still enslaved, building any institution that you can imagine.

For a lot of people, when you think of Black New York, it now is, you go to Harlem. There is this narrative that Black people came to New York with the Great Migration. Without exploring this early history in addition to slavery, you get this distorted image that Black New Yorkers were not here for as long as they have been, and they have not been actively staking claim on space.

Amanda Adler Brennan:

So much of what we've been discussing about the Black experience in New York is not the type of stuff that you find in your standard history books. Why is some of this history glazed over?

Lauren O'Brien:

One thing that it's important to point out is that scholars now have been able to document this, where we do know that there's this history, and now people are expanding it. But in thinking about historical monographs, which are the traditional academic histories, as you pointed out, that's not what your average person is reading or learning about. It's definitely not what you're getting in textbooks.

It's like the famous African proverb, that until the lions have their own historian, the hunt will always be the thing that's glorified. In other words ... that's my paraphrase of that proverb. There are archives that are being created while history is happening. These archives are political. When I say archive, you want to think about diaries that people are writing, letters, formal documents that are sharing an institution's histories. In the 19th century and even pre that, people are very proactive, and this is where we're getting our histories from. It's privileging certain sources, and most often these sources are whitewashed, or they are excluding the narratives of people of color. In the case of the Black experience, most often they are excluding that.

It's important, through my work, to share that. I'm not uncovering these histories, but rather uncovering the work of Black folks, or Black institutions, that have preserved this history. I'm looking at the traces that they have left. Maybe, for example, in the Tenement Museum, or on the Lower East Side, the Black experience has not been told. In a public way, it has been less preserved, but people in communities have passed down these histories, and that's where we get these sources. You have people who ... I will be interviewing in a few weeks a 94 year old man who has lived in the Lower East Side for 50 years. Thinking about somebody who has 50 years of knowledge, where he probably would not be considered ... he's someone who has approached the institution. We wouldn't know to go seek out this person, he didn't write a book about being Black on the Lower East Side, but personally he has his own archive.

In thinking about what we possess, or your own family, how your family passes down stories ... This is how we're able to trace and to challenge these histories. In trying to not just add on these histories, but rethink these core narratives that New Yorkers are telling about themselves, but also that Americans are telling about themselves. What does it mean to not just include these narratives, but to rethink our story?

Amanda Adler Brennan:

The last stop of the tour is to the African Burial Ground down in Lower Manhattan. Can you talk about how the Burial Grounds are related to the Black experience on the Lower East Side, and more specifically to the museum itself?

Lauren O'Brien:

Why the African Burial Ground is so important, is because for us, it's a good model of how Black New Yorkers were proactive in preserving their history. A lot of the sites that we're visiting, as we start at the Tenement Museum and move down towards Chambers Street, there are no markers. There's not a lot of documentation done. Though a few sites, the communities that are connected to them have mobilized to save that specific site, most of them are kind of lost in books, or in archives. The African Burial Ground is an important story for all of New York, but especially for Black New York, because it is a time where the city mobilized, or was remembered, where we talked about before, where this is not what you're learning in your textbooks, but it was a sign that Black people were living here, and that there was a community that was proactive in putting their ancestors to rest, but even in thinking about history, it's an homage to your ancestors, and so making sure that that history be preserved.

Amanda Adler Brennan [narration]: The African Burial Ground is the end point of the new tour that ties recent history to the early origins of New York's black communities. It's one of the oldest sites of African American history, and also one of the city's most recently established memorials. Visitors will be able to pay their respects and contemplate the importance of setting aside space to reflect on community presence, then and now, with rangers like Derrick Head.

Derrick Head:

My name is Derrick Head. I'm a park service ranger for the National Park Service. I give tours of different national park service sites here in New York City, taking people around the sites and explaining the history of the site and why it is significant and how it relates to our society today. Today we are here at the African Burial Ground.

Amanda Adler Brennan [narration]: The African Burial Ground is a museum and memorial. As we neared the entrance of the memorial, Derrick pointed to a long, narrow patch of grass. This marked the beginning of our journey back to the 17th Century.

Derrick Head:

When you first walk out to the African Burial Ground Monument, which is located on the East side of 290 Broadway on Duane Street, to your right hand side, as you walk in you'll see seven mounds. There were 419 remains removed from where the building of 290 now sits. The remains were brought back in 2003, and under each mound there are 60 remains except one of them. I believe it's this one here closest to the street. They are all in coffins, whether or not they were originally buried in a coffin or not, and we saw an

example of one of those in the visitor's center. It was that small, baby-sized coffin that has the carvings on there.

Amanda Adler Brennan [narration]: There's significance behind the number of mounds. The number 7 was chosen because in African mythology it represents perfection. The mounds were put in place as a reminder to those who visit, that people are actually buried there.

He explained that the Africans who used this land would not have actually used mounds, but instead, they placed rocks, pebbles or other natural objects to mark the graves of their loved ones.

Where we stood, there were approximately 200 remains beneath the memorial. But during the initial excavation in the early 1990s, ground penetrating radar revealed more remains that couldn't be uncovered for re-burial.

Derrick Head:

That's why we're not sure if there are exactly 200. Could be a little bit more, could be a little bit less. That's why we give those numbers, 419 roughly, 619, 620, and then 15 to 20,000 for the entire four block area.

Amanda Adler Brennan:

Now, were there are a lot of remains that were found that couldn't be determined who they belonged to or even if that was a full person that had been buried here?

Derrick Head:

Well, what happened with the archeologists, the first thing they try to find is the skull, because that's going to give you the top. Then they go down to the feet, so that'll tell them how long or how tall the person was, and then they can excavate the rest of the site or the grave site particularly. There were remains where you were not able to determine whether or not it was a man or a woman based on the size. Because if they were buried in a coffin, when the wood decomposes, it leaves something called a coffin stain. So the color where the wood is, the color of the soil is going to be different, usually darker. So they can determine approximately how old a person was, whether it was a child, whether it was an adult, whether it was a teenager based on height.

But there were some sites where there were no remains at all. Now, that could be either the bones completely decomposed and there was nothing there. It could be that they were removed and not put back because there was something called the Doctor's Riots

in the 1700's. King's College, which is now Columbia Medical School, the students would come out here and dig up the remains and do their homework on the remains, and that's because the burial ground was considered a Potter's field. It was not consecrated ground because it was not next to a church. So, this is where, under the idea of British rule, where the outcasts were buried, so it didn't really matter what you did with those people.

Amanda Adler Brennan [narration]: Derrick continued to walk me through the memorial. It's relatively small, but an incredibly powerful space. There's no doubt this is sacred ground...as I walked with Derrick—that feeling was palpable.

After we passed the 7 mounds, we approached a large stone structure coming out of the ground. This is the monument itself.

Derrick Head:

This is the part that represents that upside down slave ship, and the first wall that you see is known as the Wall of Remembrance.

Amanda Adler Brennan [narration]: On the wall, there's an inscription.

Derrick Head:

"For all of those who are lost, for all of those who were stolen, for all of those who are left behind, and for all of those who are not forgotten."

Amanda: This quote refers to the end of the Transatlantic slave trade, when people were forcibly taken from Africa and brought to North America.

Next to the inscription Derrick pointed to a heart-shaped symbol on the same wall.

Derrick Head:

So, you'll see the Sankofa symbol, that symbol from burial number 101. We use that symbol on everything because of burial number 101. So that's a common thing actually, with the burial ground.

Amanda Adler Brennan [narration]: Burial 101 was the 101st grave found during the excavation. The coffin belonged to a man who was nearly 6 foot 5'. He was somewhere between 26-35 years old.

For someone between their mid 20s and thirties, he was aged beyond his years...his bones tell a story of injury, illness, and hard labor.

By looking at a deep groove found at the base of his skull, where the skull meets the spinal column, archaeologists and doctors determined he was lifting at least 250 lbs above his head, walking long distances approximately 10 to 12 hours a day, 5-6 days a week.

The groove indicates that his trapezius muscles, which are attached to the back of the skull and extend to the neck and shoulders, had separated under the constant stress of labor.

The man had additional cracks and stresses to his bones...he suffered from decalcification; he had rickets and a polio-like disease that caused his shin bone to flatten and bow.

Burial 101 also has particular significance to the Burial Ground. Nailed onto the man's coffin lid was the heart-shaped symbol that Derrek pointed to earlier—the Sankofa, a Ghanaian symbol...

The Sankofa symbolizes a bird looking forward and backward, forming the shape of a heart. Roughly translated, the symbol means: "Look to the past to under the present, and move forward."

This is why the symbol is prevalent throughout the Burial Ground and why it was adopted by the National Park Service as the symbol of the site.

I continued on with Derrick, moving deeper into the monument.

Derrick Head:

The way this monument was actually designed to go through is, you'll first see the Wall of Remembrance. You'll pass a door and go to the other side, which is the Memorial Wall, and on the Memorial Wall, you're going to see two maps. One is embossed on top of the other, so you see the modern day map which shows you those road coordinates. Chamber Street will be on the bottom, which is heading south, and then you'll go up to the top, you'll see Duane Street, which is the road you walk down to get to the burial ground, to the burial ground monument I should say.

To your left hand side, or to the west, that represents Broadway, and to your right, or to the east, will be Center Street. This shows you the 6.6 acre area that is the modern day burial ground. You'll also see a symbol to the right, which kind of looks like a kaleidoscope or a swirl, and that's that African symbol that represents the journey and that's how the tile is laid out in the Circle of Diaspora. So, it gives a connection.

Amanda Adler Brennan:

Absolutely huge. It's unbelievable the physical space that it took up in New York City, even at that time. There was more space obviously, but as a modern day New Yorker, it's almost an unimaginable amount of city space to be taken up.

Derrick Head:

It's a pretty large area. We have several buildings in that space, so the door has a significance as we walk through. The door is a duplicate of the slave castle on Goree Isle in Senegal. The archeologist actually went over there and measured this door and made the duplicate. Then, another important thing about this door is the slave castle on Goree Isle is a world heritage site, and in honor of this monument, you'll see that there's a symbol up above it. That's the African symbol of hope and we call this the Door of Return. They have done the same thing with their Door of No Return. They have put that symbol above it and officially renamed their door the Door of Return in honor of this monument.

So over in Africa, once slaves are captured they're kept either near the coast or on an island in large buildings that have large separate rooms. Men and women are kept separately, and then there'll be one area in which they will leave that place to board ships and go to wherever they're going to go. So, these big, large concrete buildings have many names. Slave castles, slave dungeons, slave warehouses. They weren't good places. Some of the more famous ones, like I said, the one on Goree Isle, there's the other one in Ghana, Casa Alameda, there's another one in Benin. These places still exist. People take tours of them, and the historians there will really touch a bone on you if you ever go to those places. So, we're quite honored to have a historic site, a world heritage site on the other side of the world do something to honor this monument.

Amanda: As we came down the steps of the monument, we walked six feet underground into The Circle of Diaspora. Once you enter the circle, and look back to the monument—the outline of a slave ship becomes even more obvious.

Derrick Head:

If you can envision a way a ship looks when it's right side up, picture what it would look like if it flipped over, if it's capsized and you're looking at it from the front. That's basically what you're looking at when you look at the monument. So, also the monument when we're standing in a Circle of Diaspora was six feet below street level and there are still approximately 200 remains underground. They're 30 feet underground, so we're now 24 feet away from those remains. But when you look at the ship, the height of the ship that you're looking at now is 24 feet.

Amanda: It was wintertime when I visited the Burial Ground. It was cold and windy...damp from all the rain that soaked the ground. Standing next to Derrick, I realized that even just 6 feet below street level, we couldn't entirely hear the sounds of the city. During the Summer, those sounds are even more distant, softened by a waterfall and reflection pool that run throughout the Circle.

Derrick Head:

The water coming out would also give you a kind of a sound deadening quality and make you sound like you're on a boat when you're walking through that chamber. But it has another meaning. It represents the turbulent waters of slavery. The water coming down, that waterfall, is a transition down to the calming waters of freedom. So a lot of people will notice too that the floor is a map of the world with Africa being in the center and you'll see the tile laid in a circular pattern, which will have that symbol that is the journey.

Amanda Adler Brennan [narration]: On the floor of the monument, there are also burial numbers in tribute to those buried in the mounds. Visitors can match those numbers to a wall inside the Visitor Center, where you can find photographs of the gravesites and remains. The photographs document just a fraction of the burials. If every burial was excavated and photographed, the photos would wrap around the entire museum gallery of the African Burial Ground.

Near the etched burial numbers, there are additional symbols representing various faiths, natural elements and cultural images on the wall encircling the lower ground of the monument.

Derrick Head:

Majority of them are African because the majority of people buried here were African, but Native Americans were also enslaved to somewhat. Native Americans were also the beginnings of the Underground Railroad as they offered sanctuary and asylum to

Africans escaping European colonies. So we have their symbol on the wall, the medicine wheel.

We also have the Latin cross because Africans used Christianity as a way to gain their freedom. It was thought that because you're not white, you're not Christian, even though someone actually were. But we do know here anyway, the 419, a good majority of them was actually Muslim, and that's why we have the crescent moon and star on the wall as well. The granite, as I said earlier, is obsidian green. It's a very dark green. It comes from Africa. The white granite comes from North America. So we have two different continents, two different peoples. We wanted to have materials from those two continents to create this monument. Green and white were Islamic colors. Green stands for paradise, white innocence, purity, and death.

Amanda Adler Brennan [narration]: The upper and lower level of the monument is designed to put you on a physical, spiritual, and psychological journey, especially when you near the monument's end...where you'll find the burial numbers and symbols Derrick described. That lower level is the Circle of Diaspora.

Along the Circle's perimeter, a ramp spirals down the court...bringing you closer to the ancestors and original internment level of the grounds. Derrick explained that the ramp serves as a bridge between the living and the spiritual realm.

Derrick Head:

We're going to make our way like the sun and, as we travel, we're going to ascend and return back to the Realm of the Living.

Amanda Adler Brennan:

What would you say visitors tend to be most surprised about when they visit this site in terms of New York City's relationship with slavery?

Derrick Head:

The fact that it was so prolific. The Duke of York, the namesake of this state, was a slaveholder, and the King of England. So, a lot of people are not aware because in schools we are taught slavery as part of our Civil War learning, and by that time, pretty much slavery was isolated to the South and it was trying to be expanded westward. We think of, the North, you were free, and the South, you were enslaved, and people forget that in the early days, in the 1600's and the 1700's, slavery existed everywhere in what we now call the United States.

Amanda Adler Brennan:

Although our sites are not directly related, we are working together on an upcoming walking tour. When considering the broad topic of black migration in New York City, why is it important to visit this site?

Derrick Head:

Well, because I think that migration starts here. If you think about Dutch New Amsterdam, slaves moving from below Wall Street to north of Canal Street and having their own community. That's another thing a lot of people are surprised about. They are aware of Seneca Village, which lasted 25 years and was a 40 acre plot of land and was ... Basically the city bought that from the owners, which were black people that lived in that little area, and those people left and went upstate. Whereas here, you had 1000 acres owned by black people and the British passed a law forcing them off their land and literally taking it without any compensation. I don't think people are aware of that situation. So, I think when you're talking about the black migration, you're seeing it literally move from New York Harbor straight up through Manhattan all the way to the north and going all the way upstate.

Amanda Adler Brennan:

Derrick, thank you so much for joining us today. It's been a pleasure talking to you. Is there anything else, any last things you want to tell our listeners?

Derrick Head:

The National Park Service, we're here. We have 10 sites on the island in Manhattan as well as Governor's Island. We'd just like everybody to come out and learn some New York history and have some fun.

[fade in HTBA theme]

Amanda Adler Brennan [narration]: The National Park Service sites are just one way to experience the places that memorialize New York's black history. These places are here, but in certain parts of the city you have to try a bit harder to find them. When our collective memory fails us, we have to look for ways to retell our stories, and rethink our history. Because the struggle, as Carl Johnson put it, continues

Lauren described part of this struggle as a search for place, and the ongoing effort of placemaking. But it's not enough to just establish those places. Especially for those spaces that have changed or are gone, we have to remember them, acknowledge their stories and honor the characters who made them. Our upcoming Black Migrations tour

strives to help find some of those places, help restore them to public memory, and share their stories.

Black history in New York stretches—as far back as the city’s founding. It really can’t be separated from the history of New York itself. Black history *is* New York History—as much as it can be represented by any group. Because this city simply would not have existed, and continued to thrive in the way that it has, without the experiences and contributions of the Black people who have helped to create it.

Help us share more stories like these. By leaving a review or subscribing, you’re working with us to ensure that more people find these stories and histories. And be on the lookout, we have more episodes coming soon. I can’t wait to share them with you.

From the Tenement Museum, I’m Amanda Adler Brennan. Thanks for listening.

[fade out HTBA theme]

Hey listeners I’m Jas Chana, the associated director of pr for the tenement museum.

This episode was produced by Rachel Davila Ramirez. Off the mic is our podcast team: Angela Serratoray, Katie Lopez, Cassandra Pena, Christine Farrell, Emily Mitzner, Jamie Salen, Katie Heimer, Michelle Moon, David Favaloro, and David Eng. Our music is provided by Title Card Music. Additional music is provided by Blue Dot Sessions. A special thanks to CDM Studios—Charles de Montebello, Tucker Dalton, and the entire CDM Staff. Please rate, comment and subscribe wherever you listen to podcasts. And thanks for listening.