A JOURNEY FROM MANNAHATTA TO MANHATTAN

Published in National Parks Traveler (now defunct), June 2025

By Sue Eisenfeld

I wanted to see old New York, the earliest New York, the Lenni Lenape land of Mannahatta ("island of many hills"), the 1624 Dutch colony of New Amsterdam, and the 1664 English colony named for the Duke of York, the chief investor in an English slave trading enterprise. Not the razzle-dazzle of Broadway or Times Square, not the quaint, urban vibe of Greenwich Village, not the tony brownstones of the Upper West Side. I wanted to see New York as the small, walled city it once was, the pre- and post-Revolutionary War urban village. So I took myself on a walking tour of some of the oldest sites in New York—care of the National Park Service.

Stop 1 of the 1.8-mile tour is **Castle Clinton National Monument**, at the southern tip of Manhattan in Battery Park—the strategic site of the former Fort Amsterdam and its artillery batteries. Built by enslaved workers in 1808, West Battery, as it was called, was used as a garrison town by Americans intending to keep out the British, one of four forts built in New York Harbor in the years just before the War of 1812. Later it became an entertainment venue called Castle Garden, and then the first immigration processing depot on our shores from 1855 to 1890, before Ellis Island. In 1941, Robert Moses, the New York City Commissioner, wanted Castle

Clinton demolished, calling it an “ugly wart” with “no history worth writing about”; it was partially torn down and then NPS took it over in 1950. Many people mill about this site intending to embark on a ferry to NPS’s Statue of Liberty National Monument and Ellis Island, but walking around or taking a ranger tour of the round, red sandstone fort is its own attraction.

As I made my way up State Street to my next NPS location, I passed two NPS-affiliated sites. First, the **Alexander Hamilton U.S. Custom House**, formerly the New York Custom House and now the National Museum of the American Indian, a huge, gorgeous seven-story, Beaux Arts style building that is a National Historic Landmark, part of the Wall Street Historic District, and listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Next, **Bowling Green**, New York City’s oldest park, also part of the Wall Street Historic District.

This tiny triangular park embodies some of the oldest history in New York—it was once the council ground for the Lenape and home to a sacred elm tree that served as a meeting place, the supposed site of Dutch Governor Peter Minuit’s purchase of Manhattan in 1626, used by the Dutch as a cattle market, and where the British built a statue of the king and protestors gathered in the lead-up to the Declaration of Independence. Its western border is also the beginning of the oldest north–south main thoroughfare in New York City, running the length of the island, originally a Native American footpath that connected different villages, which was widened by enslaved workers to become the main road through New Amsterdam, Broad Way.

Within 10 minutes, I found myself at NPS Stop 2: **Federal Hall National Memorial**. From the outside, in the cold, I reflected on this site of the 1703 Federal-style City Hall, the meeting place for the first U.S. central government and the first U.S. Congress, and where George Washington was sworn in as the nation's first president. The building I laid eyes on, with eight Doric columns, was the 1842 Greek Revival style re-build that served as the U.S. Custom

House and is now a memorial to our first president, with visitor center exhibitions, tours, and reenactments.

While I was there, I poked around **Wall Street**, the center of the Wall Steet Historic District, where enslaved people built a literal wall out of dirt and wood, from the East River to the Hudson River, that stood from 1653 to 1699 at the original outer barrier of the city. The Dutch called it "the Belt" or later, "City Wall." Now a narrow street walled by Tiffany & Co., the Trump Building, the New York Stock Exchange, and other skyscrapers, back then the wall was meant to prevent a land invasion of English troops, then to keep out Native Americans as well, while the English and Dutch took and re-took over the area from one another.

From 1711 to 1762, the city's first slave market was located at the foot of Wall Street, so I made a little detour down to Mannahatta Park to see where white residents had bought and sold human beings. One year after that slave mart opened, in this city that had one of the largest populations of kidnapped forced labor in the colonies, a group of about 20 enslaved Africans set fire to a building one night in April. While the white people tried to put the fire out, the enslaved were prepared with guns, hatchets, and swords to ambush them. The **site of the 1712 Slave Revolt** of the **African Burial Ground National Monument** (part of the NPS **African-American Freedom Trail**), at the northwest corner of Maiden Lane and William Street, is Stop 3 on the walking tour of old New York.

Heading back to Broadway as my main route, I passed **City Hall Park**, another one of New York's oldest places and part of the African-American Freedom Trail. From 1653 to 1699, it was a communal pasture ground for livestock called the Commons; from 1736 to 1797 it was the site of an almshouse for the city's poor. Also in the 1700s stood a debtors' prison and a soldiers' barracks; the British held prisoners in the almshouse during the Revolutionary War, and they

executed some of them behind the barracks. In 1741, the park was the site of 35 executions by hanging or burning for Blacks and whites accused of setting fires across the city as part of a slave uprising. The 1803 City Hall currently on this site, now considered to be in nearly the lowest of Lower Manhattan, was then considered to be located in the far North of the city, out in the sticks.

Stop 4 is the **burial ground** of the **African Burial Ground National Monument**, which is the oldest and largest known excavated burial ground in North America for free and enslaved Africans. Discovered thirty feet below the street level in 1991 during construction of a federal office building, the 6-acre "Negroes Buriel Ground [sic]," it was located outside the walled city on Dutch private land. Used from the mid-1630s—just after the first enslaved Africans were kidnapped and transported to New York to work as laborers for the Dutch West India Company—to 1795, it contains 15,000+ intact skeletal remains, and in some places, people are buried three and four deep.

I made my visit on a weekend, when the visitor center and museum located in the federal building is unfortunately closed, but the outdoor memorial includes signage, an artistic memorial sculpture, and several burial mounds. Standing on that sacred site, looking aboveground and up is what seems like the real city but what's below ground is where so much of the past has actually happened—the story of New York, the builders and the dreamers of New York, exist beyond the bright lights, literally beyond the surface of the city, deep in its soil and bedrock, in memory.