

STORIES of BONES

Peggy King
Jorde '76
and the Work
of Reparative
Justice and
Preservation

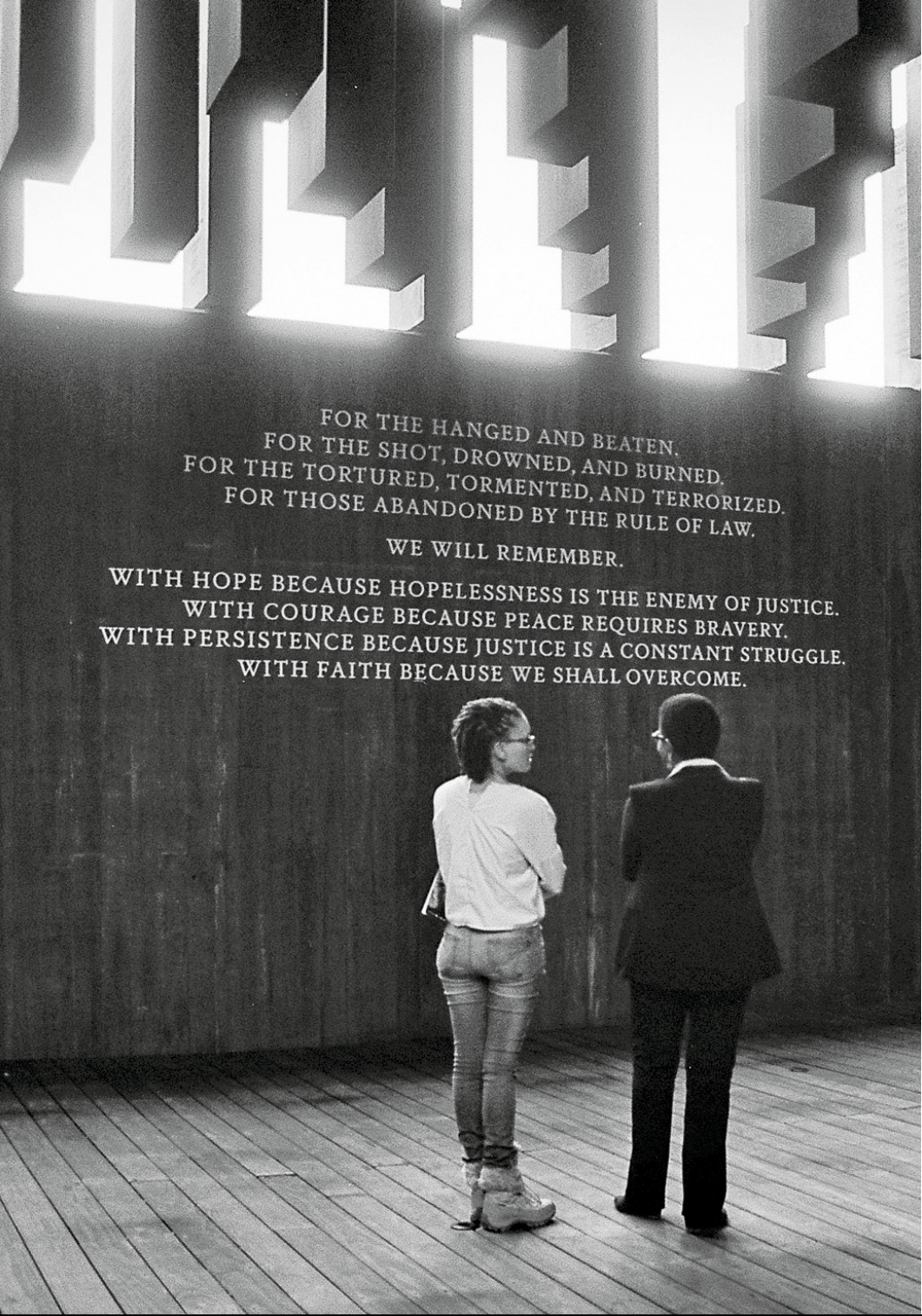


Above: Peggy King Jorde '76.
Opposite: The Memorial Wall at the African Burial Ground National Monument

Albany, Georgia and Putney, Vermont, 1950s–1980s
In mid-March 1988, Peggy King Jorde '76 began making good on a promise made to her father: that upon his death, she and brother Leland King '75 would build his coffin by hand. The two, who by then were both architecturally trained, sketched out a design, placed sawhorses on the undertaker's back porch, and attended to what can only be described as a labor of love. The result: a pine box handsomely made to cradle their father in his "crossing over."
"It was both personal and profound," Peggy recalls of fulfilling a duty to a man the world knew as the legendary civil rights attorney C.B. King. "His skills inside the courtroom served as a powerful weapon in defense of Blacks in South Georgia at the height of Jim Crow."
After his death, Peggy would begin following in her father's footsteps, advocating for Black people, defending their humanity in death and dedicating her life to preserving their final resting place—literally around the globe.
Years before crafting her father's coffin, Peggy's time at Putney made it clear she was no stranger to working with her hands. Arriving in the fall of '73, she joined Leland and other students in the construction of a new art building. She built costumes for stage productions at Lower Farm. She designed and crafted jewelry in the school's metalworking studio. And, like many students, she laid bricks for what was then the KDU's new patio.

Peggy headed to Bennington, where she studied architecture and costume design. Then to Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation. Her studies there led to an internship—and ultimately a job—in the Mayor's Office of Construction for the City of New York.
Much of her work in City Hall involved interior design projects. The mayor's private chambers, Gracie Mansion. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. PS 1 in Long Island City. But the discovery of an African burial ground in the middle of a bustling lower Manhattan city block would change the trajectory of her work and, indeed, her life—forever.

Lower Manhattan, 2024
The African Burial Ground National Monument in lower Manhattan is a quiet space of reverence nestled near the busy Federal Plaza where the NY County Courthouse looms above Foley Square. You enter the monument by passing memorial burial mounds and walk through a massive sculpture of sleek stone into a circular outdoor sanctuary, with walkways descending along a curving memorial.
The burial mounds mark the re-interment sites of 419 African descendants who were unearthed when the burial ground was rediscovered in 1991.
The sleek, imposing sculpture, made of polished granite and called the Ancestral Chamber, soars 24 feet high, intentionally recalls the bow of a ship, and represents the Middle Passage across the Atlantic Ocean.
The circular memorial wall is inscribed with images and shapes from Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean that represent the far reaches of the African Diaspora.

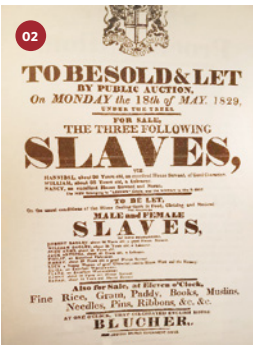
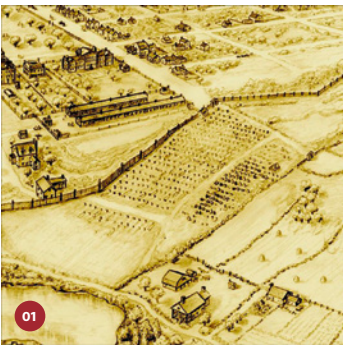


And finally, after your circular descent, you find yourself standing on a map of the world, with West Africa at its center, and circular rays of light reaching to North American, Brazil, Europe, and the Caribbean. The sites of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Its hushed stillness is sacred and haunting.

Lower Manhattan, 1600s, 1700s, 1990s
In the early 1600s, Dutch settlers arrived in New York. Early maps (see below) of what is now Lower Manhattan show a burial ground where enslaved Africans were allowed to congregate and bury deceased members of their community in a ravine.
At the time, the city did not allow the burial of Africans, and the burial ground was located outside of the city limits. As the city grew and expanded southward, the city boundary shifted with it, and the development of streets and buildings in the early 1800s led to the filling of the ravine, which is estimated to have witnessed more than 20,000 burials.
In 1990, Peggy worked for then-mayor David Dinkins. Late-career civil servant Harry Wurster, a colleague from the Parks and Recreation Department, left Peggy a hand-written note asking her to have a brown-bag lunch with him. Wurster, a lover

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The sites of Peggy's work include a grim history. For decades, she has made headlines and traveled the world telling these stories.



- 01. The "Negroes Burial Ground" near the Collect Pond, Manhattan (late 1700s map); Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons
- 02. Slaves sale notice, St. Helena 1829
- 03. St. Helena burial ground mapping and skeletons



- 04. Peggy's work on Manhattan's African Burial Ground made headlines in 1992
- 05. Mayor David Dinkins (center), Peggy King Jorde (Mayor's Liaison), and Howard Dodson (Chief, Schomburg Center) (front) are briefed on the excavation by Michael Parrington (Principal Archaeologist for HCI and John Milner Associates), 1992
- 06. Peggy stands on the site of the African Burial Ground Monument

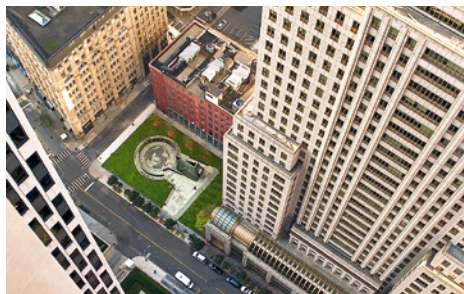


Above: Siblings Leland King '75, Peggy King Jorde '76, and Clennon King '78. **Top left:** Attorney C.B. King, left, with Martin Luther King, Jr. **Bottom left:** Aerial view of the African Burial Ground in Lower Manhattan

of old maps with many connections in the city offices, had received an environmental impact statement for a proposed federal building project two blocks north of City Hall. Wurster trusted Peggy to understand the importance of that statement's findings—the discovery of a burial ground of enslaved Africans—and to act on that discovery. Struck by the revelation, and moved by Harry's concern, Peggy considered Wurster's request to take the report directly to Mayor Dinkins.

Peggy debated how best to proceed, especially given the complex layers of city government and her relative newness to working there. Harry dropped by regularly to ask if she'd spoken to someone. This cycle repeated for a while, and in 1991, Peggy took action. She leaned on her connections through her work in the Mayor's Office of Construction to get people to listen and to act—to strategically draw attention to the site and its historical significance.

Peggy reflected on this time period in a recent interview with the New York



Preservation Archive Project: “A moment which made this preservation project personal was when Landmarks [Preservation Commission] invited me to take a walking tour at the site. I joined a group of city employees for a visit to the site under excavation [see timeline below]. We were met by ... one of the archaeologists. A question was raised, ‘We understand that this was an African burial ground for enslaved people. What have you found or what can you tell us?’ When the archaeologist answered, he clearly gave an answer that was intended to diminish significance.” Peggy had heard whispers that the federal government had issued a gag order to archaeologists not to have that conversation. She felt his response was intended “to be a way of disappearing the people who may or may not be buried there.”

The response signified something bigger than one archaeologist. It was further evidence of a pattern of ignoring forgotten,

buried histories. “He was rendering invisible the lives and the meaning of these people. And these people were *my people*.”

“My work was about building. Here now I was faced with a site that had personal, cultural, and historical meaning to me. That launched me learning a lot politically, socially. The project ultimately set the bar for what meaningful *community* engagement means. The project set the bar for who should be leading projects that have difficult histories tied to marginalized communities. Who has the voice? Who gets to tell the story?” Peggy said in an interview for her 2024 Pillar of New York award.

With this work, Peggy made a name for herself, and her purpose came into focus. The journey from architectural training at Columbia to interior design work on Gracie Mansion to construction projects in the Mayor's office led her to the work that would define her career, and her life, going forward.

St. Helena, South Atlantic Ocean, 2012

The island of St. Helena sits in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, 1,200 miles west of Angola and 2,500 miles east of Brazil, four time zones ahead of New York, with a total area of about 50 volcanic square miles and a population under 5,000 people. (If you enter “St. Helena” into a Google Maps search, you have to hit “zoom out” seven times before a continent appears.) Best known as the site of Napoleon's exile and death, the small island, a British Overseas Territory, was a vital outpost during the Atlantic Slave Trade.

When the British outlawed slavery in 1833, the island became a strategic post for interrupting ships on the Middle Passage. The Royal Navy raided slave ships and offloaded enslaved Africans onto the island that sits a six-day's boat ride from South Africa. But arrival on the island was not a happy rescue,

and thousands of Africans died of dehydration, dysentery, and other diseases. All enslaved Africans retrieved from the hulls of slave ships had to quarantine in St. Helena's Rupert's Valley. And thousands upon thousands of the people who died there were buried in unmarked graves.

A Story of Bones, a film that premiered at the 2022 Tribeca Film Festival and on PBS's POV, tells this story. The film is a call to action to the United Kingdom for restorative justice, and a film that asks us to think globally about the Transatlantic Slave Trade, the many countries active in its shameful history, and the importance of reclaiming and celebrating African burial grounds throughout the world. Director Joseph Curran put it this way: “The film is asking us to actively examine how we choose to remember our histories.”

In 2012, Annina van Neel arrived on St. Helena's as part of the project team developing the island's first airport. Arriving by boat after the six-day journey from Cape Town, Annina described the island in a 2024 *Guardian* article as an oasis in a desert, and an enigma. During excavation and construction of the road that would lead to the new airport, crews uncovered a mass burial ground of formerly enslaved Africans. Annina knew well the standard logistics of the work ahead—the bureaucracy of environmental protection, cultural considerations, dust and noise reduction, waste management. She also knew about the bones; 325 human skeletons had been unearthed when the road was constructed four years earlier. But she was unprepared for the *impact* of the bones and the power of the stories they would uncover.

As construction continued and thousands of more bones were discovered, she wrote, “I found myself struggling to negotiate the relationship between my own identity, the

identity of those lying in the ground or in boxes, and the identity of an idyllic community whose own history is woven into a rich tapestry of colonialism, slavery and the slave trade.”

Annina knew she could not do this alone. She needed support, and turned to the internet to see who, if anyone, could help her with this work. She found Peggy. Peggy and Annina connected online. For over a year, Peggy offered support and consultation through email and Skype calls, but Peggy also knew that the real work needed to be done in person, because the work is about communities. She joined the film as a consulting producer (and a key protagonist). “The bedrock of doing any kind of memorialization is the *community*. You have to build a groundswell of community support,” Peggy said in a recent interview. She saw, and helped address, the fragmentation on St. Helena. Peggy met St. Helena's governor and asked her why the government wasn't taking action to build a memorial site. Peggy spoke to the community about New York's African Burial Ground. “Everyone [on St. Helena] knew there were remains,” said Peggy, who is careful not to indict St. Helena's residents. “We know who the culprit is. All of the island's funding comes from London ... This is a burial ground that is upwards of 10,000 individuals.” This is a global site. And Peggy wants the burial ground to receive the global attention support it deserves.

St. Helena's airport opened to commercial flights in 2017. The film crew for *A Story of Bones* has traveled the world promoting the movie and telling their story and they continue to advocate and to share their call for action on a global scale. They have spoken on radio and television, presented lectures, and appeared at film festivals around the world (Tribeca Film Festival, Movies That Matter, Berlin Film Festival, and many more).

Said Annina of Peggy, “It felt like connecting with a source that was created over generations to address exactly the situation that we found ourselves in, connected by our shared history.” Said Peggy, “The film is the story of two women of color on opposite sides of the Atlantic who are trying to preserve and memorialize a burial ground in the South Atlantic the island of St. Helena.” And, as Peggy says in the film, “You don't turn your back on something like this. It's immense.”

Peggy was born to a lawyer father and a mother, Carol R. King, who left a teaching job to found the Head Start program. “A life of service was at the heart of their vocations; in fact, ‘service’ was at the heart of the community,” said Peggy. A commitment to family and community have taken Peggy from Albany, Georgia, to Putney—which her daughter, Lena, attended, and for which Peggy spent fifteen years on the school's board of trustees—to New York, and now throughout the country and the world. But she was born in Georgia in the 1950s. “I will never lose sight of the fact that I was born into an American apartheid in the basement of a segregated hospital in Albany, Georgia,” said Peggy.

Her work, and our reporting about it, requires us to listen and to consider the emotional depth and impact of these burial grounds. As Peggy supports descendant communities and fosters support for her work, we are all tasked with recognizing the significance of these sacred sites, and the historical and cultural trauma they hold.

*For all those who were lost
For all those who were stolen
For all those who were left behind
For all those who were not forgotten**

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07. The completed African Burial Ground National Monument

08. Filming *A Story of Bones* on St. Helena

09. Peggy and Annina Van Neel



10. *The Story of Bones* film crew

11. Peggy with filmmakers Joseph Curran and Dominic Aubrey de Vere

12. *A Story of Bones*, movie poster

13. Peggy at the Movies that Matter festival, 2023