

# African Burying Ground a sacred opportunity

At sunrise, on May 23, a procession will leave the New Hope Baptist Church carrying nine coffins for interment at the African Burying Ground on Chestnut Street, Portsmouth.

The coffins contain the remains of the city's earliest African-American residents, both free and slave, discovered during infrastructure improvement work on Chestnut Street in October 2003. Research reveals the site was a segregated "Negro Burying Yard," in use from the 1700s through the 19th century, likely containing the remains of up to 200 African-Americans.

The coffins, built by local furniture maker Jeffrey Cooper, will be carefully placed into an underground vault and a brief ceremony will be held to mark the occasion. The reburial will also mark the official opening of the African Burying Ground, a project of deep historical significance that will transform the city in ways both known and still unfathomable.

"We are returning the Chestnut Street site to sacred ground; the Portsmouth community has found a meaningful and powerful way of honoring those buried beneath the street," said Vernis Jackson, chair of the African Burying Ground Committee. "These events are about remembering the dead and returning the remains to the earth, as well as acknowledging the site's history and celebrating the community-wide effort that has made this project possible."

On the topic of slavery, America tends to focus on the pre-Civil War South. But slavery also existed in the North, including Portsmouth, where slaves were auctioned right off the ship or at Stoodley's Tavern on Congress Street, according to Valerie Cunningham, author of "Black Portsmouth," and head of the Portsmouth Black Heritage Trail. Records show that in 1708 there were 70 enslaved Africans living in New Hampshire.

African Burying Ground researchers found: "A few black people in colonial Portsmouth were free. Most were not. They included skilled craftsmen such as cooper Nero Wheelright and potters Adam and Mercer Marshall. Primus Fowle was a familiar presence in the New Hampshire Gazette print office where he labored as a pressman."

In 1779, influenced by America's own Declaration of Independence, 20 Portsmouth slaves petitioned the state legislature asking it to "enact such laws and regulations as in your wisdom think proper, whereby we may regain our liberty and be ranked in the class of free agents and that the name of slave may not more be heard in a land gloriously contending for the sweets of freedom."

While the original slave petition was found in state archives 30 years ago, the African Burying Ground project brought this significant document to popular attention. We believe in the coming decades, as its story becomes known, it will be counted among sacred American documents. In 2013, the Legislature and Gov. Maggie Hassan posthumously granting the slaves their freedom.

We'll be reporting a great deal more on the African Burying Ground projects in our news and editorial columns in the coming months. In the meantime, the project still needs about \$60,000 more to meet its fundraising goals. This is your chance to contribute to what will surely be a lasting memorial. Donations may be made on the secure website [www.africanburyinggroundnh.org](http://www.africanburyinggroundnh.org) or by check c/o African Burying Ground, 1 Junkins Ave., Portsmouth NH 03801.