

AFRICAN BURYING GROUND MEMORIAL PARK
WE STAND IN HONOR OF THOSE FORGOTTEN
PORTSMOUTH, NH

OVERVIEW & STATUS
DECEMBER 21, 2010

REDISCOVERY OF THE AFRICAN BURYING GROUND

- The African Burying Ground is located under what is now Chestnut Street (roughly between Court Street and State Street) in downtown Portsmouth, NH. As early as 1705, documents referred to the site as the “Negro Burying Ground”; in that era, this area was the undeveloped outskirts of town. The African Burying Ground was likely in use throughout the 1700s; it is the only known African burying ground that dates to this era in all of New England. Over time, as Portsmouth grew during the late 1700s and throughout the 1800s, the burying ground was paved over and built over and many forgot of its existence.
- The African Burying Ground was rediscovered in October 2003 during a City infrastructure project; the buried remains of 13 people were found and, under the direction of the State Archaeologist and with appropriate protocols, the remains of eight individuals were temporarily removed and will be reinterred at a later date. It is very likely that many more individuals are buried on Chestnut Street. Subsequent DNA testing confirmed that those found buried at the site were of African descent; it isn’t possible to determine with certainty how many of those buried here were enslaved, and how many may have been free.

DESIGN PROCESS FOR AFRICAN BURYING GROUND MEMORIAL PARK

- The Portsmouth City Council appointed the African Burying Ground Committee in 2004 and charged the Committee with determining how best to honor those buried on Chestnut Street; since that time, the Committee, now chaired by Vernis Jackson, has been working towards that end. Initially, this effort included extensive meetings with the private property owners that abut this block of Chestnut Street; in 2005, at the recommendation of the African Burying Ground Committee and the Traffic and Safety Committee, the Portsmouth City Council voted to close Chestnut Street to through traffic, while providing driveway access to the existing homes and businesses located there.
- The African Burying Ground Committee, working with City staff, contracted with an experienced design and engineering team to begin the process of developing a memorial park in a location that presents complex, almost unique construction challenges due to the fact that there are additional individuals buried here, with human remains located at very shallow depths. As part of the design process to determine how to properly honor those buried on Chestnut Street, the Committee reached out to the community via a series of public forums and design meetings attended by more than 100 people.

- The African Burying Ground Committee’s design process concluded in 2009 when the Committee and the design team presented to the Portsmouth City Council the plan for the African Burying Ground Memorial Park titled “We Stand in Honor of Those Forgotten”; the City Council endorsed by consensus the recommended design. The roughly 6,500-square foot African Burying Ground Memorial Park – *We Stand in Honor of Those Forgotten* – runs the length of Chestnut Street between Court Street and State Street and includes sculptural pieces, historical information, granite seating walls, a community plaza, decorative tiles, landscaping and pedestrian scale lighting. The Memorial Park is designed to serve as a contemplative public space, which informs visitors and honors those buried below. The estimated construction cost for the memorial park is \$1.0 to \$1.2 million.

FUNDRAISING UNDERWAY FOR *WE STAND IN HONOR OF THOSE FORGOTTEN*

- The African Burying Ground Committee is poised to begin what is expected to be an 18-month fundraising phase for this critical community project. The members of the African Burying Ground Committee have reached out to, and are now joined by, a core group of dedicated community members who plan to assist with the fundraising effort, as well as two nationally acclaimed honorary fundraising co-chairs. As a first, key step in leveraging private contributions and foundation grants – which are expected to comprise roughly three-quarters of project funding – the African Burying Ground Committee sought a substantial financial commitment from the City. On December 20, 2010 the Portsmouth City Council voted unanimously to provide \$100,000 in Urban Development Action Grant (UDAG) funding for construction of the African Burying Ground Memorial Park.
- At the request of the African Burying Ground Committee, the Portsmouth City Council recently established the African Burying Ground Trust Fund for the purpose of accepting contributions that will ultimately fund the construction and maintenance of the African Burying Ground Memorial Park, *We Stand in Honor of Those Forgotten*. Trust assets will be administered by the City’s Trustees of Trust Funds, and expended with City Council authorization for the purpose of constructing the memorial park.
- Contributions for construction of the African Burying Ground Memorial Park, *We Stand in Honor of Those Forgotten*, can be sent to African Burying Ground Trust Fund c/o Art-Speak, 1 Junkins Avenue, Portsmouth, NH 03801 with checks made payable to African Burying Ground Trust Fund.
- African Burying Ground Committee: Vernis Jackson, Chair
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