

# Celebrate burying ground memorial

**W**e stand in honor of those forgotten.” So begins the moving words of Jerome Meadows, the artist and sculptor who has designed the Portsmouth African Burying Ground Memorial Park. We are reminded of those words these days as we consider the city’s remarkable efforts to remember the enslaved people who once lived here.

The state House and Senate both unanimously passed measures to posthumously free 14 slaves who petitioned for their freedom in 1779 — something their Colonial predecessors postponed as “not ripe.” And we recently learned that the prestigious National Endowment for the Arts has awarded the burying ground a \$20,000 grant.

This noteworthy grant comes at a crucial and most-welcome time for the burying ground committee, which has been working diligently to raise the \$1.2 million necessary to create the memorial. With the grant, the fund-raising campaign reaches a total of \$720,000.

But more importantly, the NEA recognition launches the burying ground project into the national spotlight.

“We all know it’s important,” said spokeswoman Stephanie Seacord, “but the fact that it’s been recognized at that level corroborates what we’ve been saying all along.”

The NEA received 1,547 applications for its Arts Works Grants, and awarded 817 in 13 different disciplines. Yet, when it sent out public notice of the grants, it singled out only a handful — among them the African Burying Ground.

“Selected through a competitive process undertaken by the city (of Portsmouth) ... Meadows and a team of landscape architects will transform an urban block into a pedestrian-friendly public space for reverence and reflection, paying homage to the site’s history,” the NEA said in its statement.

With this grant funding in hand, the committee will soon announce its plans to start work on the monument. This is a propitious year for the work to begin, as it was a decade ago, in 2003, that workers found the remains of 13 bodies during routine street improvements on Chestnut Street. Those remains, confirmed through DNA testing to be of African descent, are among more than 200 believed to be buried in the vicinity of Court Street. Make no mistake, we not only have a local site of historical significance, it is of national importance as well. Only the African Burial Ground in New York City has confirmed through DNA testing proof of a similar graveyard. That’s what the NEA confirmed in its award, and that’s what is so worthy of celebration.

We as a city have come to claim our slave-holding past, as we witness posthumous freedom given to 14 city slaves who petitioned for freedom and as we watch Meadows’ glorious memorial park take shape. This is a time to reconcile our unsavory past with our shining present and our proud future.

Carlyle Brown, a leading African-American playwright who gave a benefit performance in February for the burying ground, had this to say about Portsmouth: “I was astonished to learn about the African Burying Ground. Here’s this largely white community embracing this historical incident as part of its social ecology. Can you recognize how hopeful that is?”

Indeed it is.