

Memorializing the Unknown Dead

When a backhoe hit coffin wood during sewer repair work in downtown Portsmouth, NH in 2003, the rediscovery of an African graveyard under the streets became national news. Like others who were drawn to the image of bodies buried under the street, I was captivated by the gruesome details that emerged from the dig. At the time I was living in Providence, RI and suffering from romantic disappointment and the kind of loneliness that came from feeling isolated from a black community, both personally and professionally. The more I learned about this story, the more intense my feelings of dislocation became.

Though the rediscovery of the burying ground shocked me and others who reported on the story, many residents of Portsmouth already had, for generations, a passing knowledge of what had been called the Negro Burying Ground, rumored to have been in existence since 1705. Nineteenth-century newspaperman Charlee W. Brewster wrote about it in his book, *Rambles About Portsmouth*, a series of editorials focused on the city, and in 2000 the Portsmouth Black Heritage Trail (PBHT), a public history project that highlights locations associated with the African-American experience, had marked the intersection of Court and Chestnut Streets with a plaque. Aside from these references, little attention had been given to the site.

In January 2006, I drove from Providence to Portsmouth to try to make sense of this history that seemed to be unearthing itself. This was the winter after Hurricane Katrina had inundated the Gulf Coast, and I was also facing the likelihood that my family's history had been washed away in the deluge. I wrote about this trip in a personal essay that was published in *Harper's Magazine* in the spring of 2008. A version of that essay also appears in my new collection, *Multiply/Divide: On the American Real and Surreal* (Sarabande, 2015). At the time I began investigating this piece, I had no idea how deeply this story would affect me, not to mention how dramatic an afternoon spent in the local library would turn out to be.

The process by which the town attempted to recognize the burying ground's significance and deal with the discomfort in doing so fascinated me, as other indicators of New England's willingness to discuss slavery emerged. Ruth Simmons, then president of Brown University, had funded a study of the institution's relationship to the slave trade. *The Providence Journal* ran a series of in-depth stories about Rhode Island's involvement in the slave trade in 2006 (and then again in 2014); the documentary film *Traces of the Trade*, which explored the accumulation of wealth in prominent New England families, was locally financed and released in 2008; and a petition to shorten the official name The State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations to the history-obscuring The State of Rhode Island, appeared on the ballot in 2010.

I was curious about this sudden attention to slavery because it was a subject that seldom arose in casual conversations about race. But the idea that slave holders had incurred debt from their exploitative practices kept coming up. Slaves worked without recognition and their contributions, whether in leveling pine boards to fit with perfect symmetry on a seaside colonial; raising children of the richest families in town; growing crops that would make American

manufacturing relevant in a global market; or installing steel girders in the high dome of the Capitol in Washington, DC. These impactful but anonymous contributions led to the ascendancy of the United States of America. But the consequences of slavery, especially the unaddressed psychological trauma of it on the progeny of both slaves and slave holders, remain largely untold.

Obama's election to the presidency made the unwillingness to discuss the lasting effects of slavery worse, as the success of his campaign led many to assume America was done with racism and racial violence. In the midst of optimism following Obama's inauguration, Oscar Grant was shot by a BART Police officer in Oakland. The murders of Trayvon Martin, Rekia Boyd, Renisha McBride, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Cynthia Marie Graham Hurd, Susie Jackson, Ethel Lee Lance, Depayne Middleton-Doctor, Clementa C. Pinckney, Tywanza Sanders, Daniel Simmons, Sharonda Coleman-Singleton, Myra Thompson, Sandra Bland, Samuel Dubose and so many others followed.

Calling out the names of victims of racial violence counters the blunting effects of anonymity in the present, but what stands in for the unknown dead?

When I first investigated the burying grounds, I did not know that a year prior to beginning the sewer project, the city had hired an archaeology firm to test the soil for human remains. As founder and director of the PBHT, civic stalwart Valerie Cunningham was invited to meet with the archaeologist and the pipeline's project manager to discuss the likelihood of finding graves. The archaeologist found no evidence while doing requisite testing. But an unanticipated leak found during the sewer work led the construction crew to dig in an area that had not been evaluated.

Thirteen years of committee meetings, a major fundraising campaign and numerous public discussions followed. On May 23, 2015 these efforts culminated with the dedication of a memorial park and the re-interment of eight people's remains. The ceremony brought visitors from throughout New England, and the town celebrated a new era.

I returned to Portsmouth nine years after my first visit, on the eve of the Fourth of July. While driving in I noticed a sign announcing Portsmouth as "A Preservation City." Many of its tourist attractions are associated with the revolutionary and maritime histories of early America. The PBHT, The Strawberry Banke Museum, Portsmouth Athenaeum, and the Moffatt-Ladd House & Garden, where William Whipple, one of the signatories of the Declaration of Independence lived, make for fascinating stops.

At the hotel I mentioned my interest in visiting the African Burying Grounds to the man at the front desk who wondered if I knew its story. I said I did. In speaking about the recent rededication ceremony, his pride in the city came across as warmth. He gave me a choice of walking directions and a map, and I selected the scenic route. Portsmouth maintains an active port, and the Savannah Pearl, a cargo ship from the Bahamas, was docked. It was humid, and the evening traffic kept apace with people returning from work, tourists arriving. Since my last visit to Portsmouth, several new multi-level buildings had been constructed giving the downtown area density and a more obvious sense of shared space.

As I came upon the African Burying Ground, now occupying the length of Chestnut Street between State and Court, I was relieved to see it had been designed to inspire reflection. This feeling was different than the numbness I felt during my first visit in 2006 when it seemed inconceivable that the consequences of slaveholding would be taken as seriously as the need to maintain desirable real estate.

A private fundraising campaign for the memorial park began during the 2008 economic crisis. Despite its bad luck in timing, the committee raised more than a million dollars over six years. The City of Portsmouth contributed an additional \$250,000 to this campaign, no small amount for a municipality of fewer than 25,000 people.

The site's design reflects a joint effort between Savannah-based artist Jerome Meadows and landscape designer Roberta Woodburn, who helped to retain the original character of the street. Long-standing businesses adjacent to Chestnut Street remain open to the public while sculptural elements tell the story of forced migration, servitude, neglect, and transformation. Somehow it all works together. Meadows's approach to the artwork features sculptural elements with a narrative component. At the top of the site on State Street, two figures stand embedded in a slab of granite. One represents the first man brought from Africa, and the other represents Mother Africa. On opposite sides of the granite wall, they reach for each other but cannot touch. During my visit I noticed fresh white flowers—maybe freesia—placed in the hand of Mother Africa. The next day the freesia was gone, but small white roses had been tucked in the folds of her headwrap.

Adinkras, Ghanian symbols representing maxims or philosophies, are employed throughout the park. The adinkra for Sankofa, the idea of historical return,

that one must “return and get it—learn from the past,” adorns the top of the burial vault. Other adinkras are printed on tiles adorning the park's southern border. The metalwork of the fence represents a Kente cloth pattern. At the bottom of the park on Court Street, eight abstracted human figures, made of concrete and plated in brass, stand in front of the fence. Each figure has a line from a poem Meadows wrote etched across their chest.

Text excerpted from a “Petition for Freedom,” submitted by 20 African men, who had been sold into slavery as children, to the New Hampshire state legislature is engraved in pavers that run the length of the memorial:

Natives of Africa, now forcably detained in Slavery in said State most humbly Sheweth, That the God of Nature gave them Life, and Freedom, upon the Terms of the most perfect Equality with other men . . . we fondly Hope that the Eye of Pitty and the Heart of Justice and Humanity may commiserate our Situation and put us upon the Equality of Freeman and give us an Opportunity of evincing to the World our Love of Freedom, by exerting ourselves in her Cause, in opposing the Efforts of Tyranny and Oppression over the Country in which we ourselves have been so long injuriously enslaved . . .

Their request for emancipation was published in *The New-Hampshire Gazette* on July 15, 1780 to amuse the paper's readership. One of the petition's signatories was Prince Whipple, whose slaveholder was Declaration of Independence signer, William Whipple.

At the bottom of the memorial near Court Street, tiger lilies bloomed in front of a neat yellow colonial. During the first half-hour of my visit I counted at least 35 people, mostly white, walking through the park. Some brought guests from out of town, presumably visiting for the holiday weekend. More than once I heard people discussing how the coffins suddenly appeared, how difficult it had been to acknowledge the city's history of forgetting its debt to slaves, and the emotional impact of the memorial park. One man chatted up four friends while explaining the site's significance. A couple with a child in an orange jogging stroller studied the landscape with great concentration. Others took pictures.

New Hampshire's position on the political stage is unmatched, and the fact that such conversations are happening here makes Cunningham hopeful that upcoming debates between political candidates will consider connections between the violence of past and present. "This is not just a Portsmouth story. This is a national story." This sentiment was shared by JerriAnne Boggis, current director of the PBHT. "[There are] a lot of issues going on that make this memorial particularly relevant right now."

The implications of erecting such a memorial are just beginning to be understood. Cunningham added, "I don't want people to think this little park is the burying ground. Who knows what was destroyed in putting the building and streets in. I'm not talking about digging everything up, but people should be aware, conscious, and thoughtful about it."

I asked Boggis what she knew about the white flowers I had noticed earlier on the figure of Mother Africa, and she told me, "There are flowers at the site every day. Flowers at the vault, around the community figures." I inquired about who was putting them there, but she had no idea. I put the same question to David Moore, Assistant City Manager for Special Projects and Community Development Director. He said that without prompting visitors have left various displays, from expensive, cellophane wrapped arrangements to handfuls of locally picked blooms. He also made the point to say, that in his experience, flowers past their prime are also tactfully removed. "People who pass the site care for it in a personal way. They have their own ways of showing respect."

When asked about this simple gesture, Cunningham sighed with a mix of appreciation and bewilderment, "Well, the city has done a good job of taking care of things. But the flowers," she said. "My son lives in a high rise across the street, and he collects the dead ones whenever he can."
