

DOWNTOWN PORTSMOUTH

African Burying Ground beginning to take shape

By Deborah McDermott
dmcdermott@seacoastonline.com

PORTSMOUTH — The first pieces of granite have arrived at the African Burying Ground Memorial Park, as work progresses according to schedule at the Chestnut Street site.

As the weeks of October and November proceed, residents should see increasing activity as the park begins to emerge from the ground, said Charlie Anderson, the lead mason at Piscataqua Landscaping, the project contractor.

"We're so excited to be part of this," Anderson said. A self-proclaimed "history buff," he said he has been amazed to learn the story of the burying ground. At least 200 Africans were buried in that part of the city, starting in 1705 and continuing through the 19th century. Over the years, the city expanded over the burial ground.

"How does that happen? I think about that," he said. "I can't imagine how you make this a city street. It was a less



Use the SMG Shine app to see a video about how work is progressing on the African Burying Ground Memorial Park in Portsmouth. For instructions, see the 'How-to-Shine' box below.

enlightened time." The work, like the park itself, will be done in three stages — first the section at the Court Street end, then a middle section, and finally the work on the State Street end.

Anderson is overseeing a team of eight masons working at park. On Tuesday, monument grade pieces of fabricated granite, each 5,850 pounds, arrived to be put into place at the Court Street end to create a circular retaining wall. The granite comes from Swenson's Granite Works in Barre, Vt., he said. He said it took a month for Piscataqua Landscaping and landscape architect Roberta Woodburn just to design the retaining wall.

Work on the wall and the granite curbing for the Court



Charlie Anderson, Lead Mason for Piscataqua Landscaping, talks about how important and special it is to be a part of creating the African Burying Ground Memorial Park in Portsmouth. They hope to have the project completed by Thanksgiving. PHOTO BY DEB CRAM/SEACOASTONLINE.COM

Street portion of the park is expected to take the rest of this week and next week.

Meanwhile, back at the Piscataqua Landscaping headquarters in Eliot, Maine, 2½ tractor-trailers full of bluestone slabs have arrived to be used to create the pavers in the park. Each piece is 4 feet by 8 or 9 feet, he said. Starting next week, half of the masons will

go back to the shop to begin fabricating the bluestone while the other half remain on site, he said.

Deputy City Manager Dave Allen said to date, no more than a few small bone fragments in disturbed earth have been found on site. "With each day, as more and more of the site work is completed, the likelihood of running into

problems is less and less," he said.

The goal is for the project to be largely completed by Thanksgiving, and as long as the weather cooperates, that should be achievable, said Allen. He said he has been very pleased so far with Piscataqua Landscaping.

"These guys have done a great job. They've worked with us very well and they've worked with the neighbors," Allen said. "I would knock on wood before I give a project too much praise, but so far so good."

Anderson said his crew "really enjoys working on the site. The neighbors have been great, the weather has cooperated. We're all happy to be here," he said, although he admits to "doing some thinking at 3 in the morning."

He said he thinks a lot about the people who have been interred under his feet. "I think about how much we as a people have changed over time," he said. "Thank goodness we are more enlightened now."