

OPINION

African Burying Ground effort needs your support

BY VERNIS JACKSON

On Oct. 17, 2003, our Portsmouth community made a momentous discovery beneath Chestnut Street when city contractors conducting utility upgrades unearthed the crumbling remains of wooden coffins. The buried remains of 13 people were found, confirming what some had suspected — this was indeed the location of the “Negro Burying Ground” cited in records dating back to 1705. Under the direction of the state archaeologist, the remains of some individuals were temporarily removed and will be reinterred at a later date. Subsequent DNA testing confirmed that they were of African descent. While it isn’t possible to determine with certainty how many of those buried here were enslaved, and how many may have been free, it’s now quite certain that many more individuals are buried at this site.

We do know that in 1779, a group of 20 Africans living in Portsmouth brought a petition to the New Hampshire House of Representatives seeking their freedom. Among the petitioners was Prince Whipple, member of the household of William Whipple, signer of the Declaration of Independence. In the months leading up to the signing of the 1776 Declaration, at once the country’s most cherished symbol of liberty proclaiming “all men are created equal,” Prince Whipple and the other petitioners had heard the impassioned arguments for freedom in their households and imagined they might be next. New Hampshire’s Legislature ignored



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Historian, Valerie Cunningham is seen on Chestnut Street in Portsmouth, site of the “Negro Burying Ground” which was approved by the city in 1705 and is now a part of the Black Heritage Trail. Cunningham and others hope the city will close down the street to vehicle traffic in order to have a stronger presence in tribute.

their petition for freedom.

Many in our community have asked how Portsmouth’s African Burying Ground could have been forgotten. During the 1700s when the burying ground was actively used, the area that is now Chestnut Street was the undeveloped outskirts of town. Over time, as Portsmouth grew during the late 1700s and throughout the 1800s, the African Burying Ground was paved over and built over and many forgot of its existence. Today, we recognize this important place as the only known African Burying Ground in all of New England that dates to this era.

Others in the Portsmouth community are asking what’s been done since the African Burying Ground was rediscovered in 2003. The answer to that question is lengthy. In 2004, the City Council appointed the African Burying Ground Committee and charged us with determining how best to honor those buried on Chestnut Street. Since that time the committee has, with painstaking care, diligently worked to carry out this charge. Let me explain why this has been no small task.

The burying ground site beneath Chestnut Street, which in today’s world is a public street

in the urban heart of our city, provides the only available access to a number of homes and businesses. So, first, the committee worked closely with abutters to strike a balance between creating a public memorial space and providing access to private properties; the abutters were helpful and supportive of the committee’s desire to close this block of Chestnut Street to through traffic. Second, the site presents complicated, almost unique challenges since additional human remains are located at very shallow depths. Perhaps the paramount issue we grappled with is that the African Burying Ground

raises complex emotional issues, making the question of how best to honor those buried here particularly challenging and humbling.

Despite these hurdles, the committee has now, to the best of its ability, answered the question of how to honor those buried in Chestnut Street’s African Burying Ground. We have done so with the generous input of property owners, the state archaeologist, a nationally known design team and, most importantly, the community via much public process and open public forums.

Our proposal, endorsed by the City Council, is the con-

struction of a memorial park titled We Stand in Honor of Those Forgotten. The intent of the memorial park is to mark with dignity the location of this sacred place — not with headstones like the city’s other places of burial — but by creating a public place of reverence on this block of urban downtown street, in perpetuity, so that we will never again forget those buried beneath. The scale and solemn significance of this memorial park is not at all dissimilar from Goodwin Park, with its commanding Soldiers and Sailors monument standing in honor of our Civil War heroes, Atlantic Heights’ Hanscom Park, which honors each one of the 10 World War II soldiers from that neighborhood, or even the recently constructed waterfront park on Ceres Street, which recognizes this city’s maritime heritage with its grand granite inlaid city seal and compass.

Now begins the next momentous task of raising funds to construct the African Burying Ground memorial park, We Stand in Honor of Those Forgotten. We have already been joined by many leading members of this community and by Art-Speak, the city’s cultural commission. Work is under way now to reach out and enlist the support of many more in our community, including hands-on involvement from our school children.

Now I ask that you stand with me — stand with all of us — in support of this daunting, noble effort.

Vernis Jackson is chairman of the African Burying Ground Committee.