

CITY OF PORTSMOUTH



City of Portsmouth Approves \$100,000 for African Burying Ground Memorial Park

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FOR MORE INFORMATION:

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between 8:00 a.m. and 4:30 p.m.

PORTSMOUTH – On Monday, the Portsmouth City Council voted unanimously to approve a request from the City’s African Burying Ground Committee to provide \$100,000 in Urban Development Action Grant (UDAG) funding for construction of the African Burying Ground Memorial Park, *We Stand in Honor of Those Forgotten*. The Memorial Park, which will be constructed on Chestnut Street in downtown Portsmouth, is estimated to cost \$1-\$1.2 million.

Portsmouth’s African Burying Ground, which was likely used throughout the 1700s, is located under what is now Chestnut Street in downtown Portsmouth, on the then-undeveloped outskirts of town. As early as 1705, documents referred to the site as the “Negro Burying Ground.” Over time, as Portsmouth grew during the late 1700s and throughout the 1800s, the burying ground was built over and many forgot of its existence, except for a mention in the Portsmouth Black Heritage Trail.

The African Burying Ground was rediscovered in October 2003 when the buried remains of thirteen people were found during a City infrastructure project. 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. 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. It is, however, very likely that many more individuals are buried on Chestnut Street, and it is the only known African burying ground that dates to this era in all of New England.

Following the rediscovery of the African Burying Ground, the Portsmouth City Council appointed the African Burying Ground Committee and asked them to recommend how best to honor those buried on Chestnut Street. Since that time, the Committee, chaired by Vernis Jackson, founder and president of the Seacoast African American Cultural Center, has been working towards that end. Initially, this effort included extensive meetings with the private property owners that abut this block of Chestnut Street and, in 2005, at the recommendation of the African Burying Ground Committee, the City Council voted to close Chestnut Street to through traffic.

Shortly thereafter, the City contracted with a design team, headed by Robbi Woodburn of Woodburn and Company, to assist the African Burying Ground Committee with the process of developing a memorial park. The downtown Portsmouth burying ground location presented particularly complex design challenges because there are additional individuals buried there, with human remains located at very shallow depths. During the design process, the Committee reached out to the community via a series of public forums and, following a national search, added artist and sculptor Jerome Meadows of Meadowlark Studios in Savannah to the design team.

The design phase concluded in 2009 when the Portsmouth City Council endorsed the African Burying Ground Committee's 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 human remains of the eight individuals removed when the burying ground was rediscovered will be reinterred when the Memorial Park is constructed.

The African Burying Ground Committee is just beginning what is expected to be an 18-month fundraising process, with private contributions and foundation grants expected to comprise roughly three-quarters of the funding needed for the \$1.0 to \$1.2 million project. A first, key step in leveraging those private contributions was this week's commitment by the Portsmouth City Council of \$100,000 in UDAG funding. UDAG funds are non-property-tax dollars, which are typically used for community enhancement and economic development projects. UDAG, an early 1980s U.S. HUD initiative, provided federal grant funding to communities that could be loaned to private developers and then repaid directly to the community with no local repayment to the federal government required. The City of Portsmouth has successfully used UDAG funds to leverage private contributions for previous projects such as the restoration of the North Church Steeple in Market Square.

At the request of the African Burying Ground Committee, the Portsmouth City Council also recently established the African Burying Ground Trust Fund to serve as a repository for funds contributed for the construction and maintenance of the African Burying Ground Memorial Park, *We Stand in Honor of Those Forgotten*. Contributions for construction can be sent to the African Burying Ground Trust Fund c/o Art-Speak, 1 Junkins Avenue, Portsmouth, NH, 03801, with checks made payable to the African Burying Ground Trust Fund. Art-Speak is the City of Portsmouth's Cultural Commission. Additional information about the project is available at www.cityofportsmouth.com.