

# HARVARD HISTORIAN JOINS PARK EFFORT

## Ulrich: Burying ground has national significance

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**P**ORTSMOUTH — Pulitzer-prize winning historian and Harvard professor Laurel Thatcher Ulrich has been named the honorary chairwoman of the African Burying Ground Memorial Park fundraising campaign.

Ulrich said she is delighted to lend her name to the effort to honor the city's African forebears.

"These are pretty rare discoveries, and therefore pretty important," Ulrich said of the burying ground in the Chestnut and State street area of the city, where more than 200 Africans are believed to be buried. "This is of national as well as

local significance."

The burying ground was discovered in 2003, when 13 graves were unearthed by construction workers on Chestnut Street. DNA evidence later confirmed that the interred were of African descent.

The African Burying Ground Committee was formed soon thereafter, and is working to raise \$1.2 million for a memorial park on the site.

For Ulrich, the burying ground discovery is part of the patchwork of colonial New England.

Ulrich's area of expertise is early American history, particularly early New England history. In 1991, while a professor at the University of

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New Hampshire, she won the Pulitzer Prize for her book, "A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard Based on Her Diaries, 1785-1812."

She is perhaps just as well known for her statement, "Well behaved women seldom make history."

It was while she was at UNH that she came to know Valerie Cunningham, Portsmouth's black historian and a member of the burying ground committee. Cunningham, she said, was at the time working on a thesis about Portsmouth's African population.

"I was certainly aware of there being African Americans, particularly in Portsmouth and Kittery (Maine), early on. I knew there was a story there," she said. "But Valerie and others have done a wonderful job of bringing these stories to life."

It was also while at UNH that Ulrich encouraged one of her undergraduate students

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**Laurel Thatcher Ulrich**  
on the African Burying  
Ground Memorial Park

to probe further into the life of Ona Judge Staines, mentioned in passing reference in a book the student had read.

Staines' story — now well known to many in Portsmouth, after books and a play were written about her — was that of a slave belonging to President George Washington who escaped and settled in nearby Greenland.

The story captured Ulrich's imagination, and she said it is

proof of Portsmouth's "very interesting history." She said she agreed to be part of the burying ground campaign in part because of the leadership role taken by the city.

"When Portsmouth is prepared, because of its history, to make something of the burying ground, I think it speaks very well for the city," she said.

As honorary chairwoman of the fund-raising campaign for the memorial park, Ulrich said she will be "celebrating and speaking to this important project" in the coming months — not only in Portsmouth, but further afield as well.

Vernis Jackson, chairwoman of the burying ground committee, said Ulrich adds a measure of prestige to the campaign.

"We are honored that Dr. Ulrich is supporting the effort to create the African Burying Ground Memorial Park," she said. "Her stature underscores the fact that this effort has national as well as local significance."