

Memorial park project gets a boost

The African Burying Ground Memorial Park fund-raising campaign has taken a significant step forward with news this week that Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich has been named its honorary chairwoman.

A Harvard professor, Ulrich is no stranger to the Granite State, having spent part of her career at the University of New Hampshire. It was while Ulrich was at UNH that she wrote, "A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard Based on Her Diaries, 1785-1812," for which she won the Pulitzer Prize in 1991. It was also at UNH that she met Portsmouth resident and burying ground committee member Valerie Cunningham, who was working on a thesis that would result in publication of her book, "Black Portsmouth." The academic relationship forged then would result decades later in Ulrich agreeing to become involved in the memorial park campaign.

Ulrich brings a national stature and a certain historical panache to the project, important qualities that will be needed as the burying ground committee looks to raise \$1.2 million. Committee members have long said that they do not expect Portsmouth or even Seacoast residents alone to donate all the money for the park. The burying ground is of national historical importance, believed to be one of only two authenticated northern U.S. sites where forensic analysis of remains have confirmed the burial of slaves. The other, in New York City, is a national monument. The park is expected to draw African Americans and other visitors from across the country. As such, say committee members, the money to create the park should come from a broad swath of Americans who understand its importance to the history of New England and our nation.

It is with this goal in mind that Ulrich has been asked to serve as honorary campaign chairwoman. The fundraising campaign is more than halfway toward its goal, with \$675,000 in expected or firm donations, pledges or in-kind services accounted for. The early success is thanks to people such as City Councilor Chris Dwyer, who has contributed \$10,000. "Everyone who takes the time to be engaged in this project falls under its spell, and that's certainly happened to me," she said.

It's easy to see why. The story of the burying ground is the story of an entire class of Portsmouth residents who have long gone unheralded and unappreciated. In 2003, the remains of 13 bodies were unearthed by utilities workers on Chestnut Street, but it is expected that as many as 200 nameless, faceless and forgotten people of African descent were buried in what was then Portsmouth's outskirts. The memorial park, designed by Atlanta-based artist Jerome Meadows, will be a fitting tribute to the memory of those slaves who lived so long ago in our city.

The task ahead for the burying ground memorial park fund-raising campaign is to tell this story to all with the interest to listen, and to allow the story to cast its spell on them. Certainly, Ulrich will help immeasurably in this regard. Her academic credentials are first rate, and her name will surely open doors for the campaign. We are truly grateful that she has agreed to participate in this venture. And we hear she may not be alone. We understand that, in coming weeks, more announcements from the campaign may be in the offing.

Congratulations to the burying ground campaign for garnering Ulrich's support. It's proof that those involved understand just what is going to be needed to make the park a reality, to honor those who for too long have had no voice.