

Lively event gives Burying Ground lift

On Monday night, the music and dance of the Soweto Gospel Choir embodied the energy and enthusiasm building for Portsmouth's African Burying Ground Memorial Park.

The concert was magnificent, as the South African choir, dressed in vibrant colors, filled The Music Hall with joyful song and movement.

After the concert, the capacity crowd of nearly 900 lit candles and walked in a procession led by African drummers to Chestnut Street, the future site of the memorial park, where as many as 200 former slaves and freed blacks are buried. On the Burying Ground site, the Soweto Gospel Choir sang its haunting encore, filling the cold February night with sounds harkening back to Africa.

It was a truly unforgettable moment for Portsmouth that showed just how far the Burying Ground project has come in a few short years.

"I think it's the most significant thing that's happened since the project started," said Vernis Jackson, the project's chairwoman.

That's really saying something, because there have been so many significant developments since bodies were rediscovered at the site during a public works project in 2003. Since that time, the project's leaders have successfully negotiated with private property owners, agreed upon the design of a 6,500-square-foot park that includes sculptural pieces, and raised community awareness and enough money for all to feel confident this project is absolutely going to happen.

So why did Monday's event feel so special?

We believe it was the night the African Burying Ground Memorial Park came to life.