

# Long overdue memorial a testament to forgotten

**W**ith the first signs of spring comes the encouraging news that 2014 will in all likelihood be the year when the long-anticipated African Burying Ground Memorial Park will be built. Although the city can not quite yet make the official announcement, all indications are that ground could be broken as early as May or June. Earlier this month, the city sought requests for qualifications from contractors, and met with interested parties last Friday. The City Council on Monday released the funds it has held in escrow for the park — funds that have been painstakingly raised over more than a decade to build this lasting monument to the city's African forebears. Requests for proposals from pre-qualified contractors will be gathered later this spring, with a finalist selected by mid-May.

It was in October 2003 when the buried remains of 13 people were found on Chestnut Street during a city infrastructure project. Under the direction of the state archaeologist, DNA testing was conducted that confirmed those buried at the site were of African descent. To date, the African Burying Ground in Portsmouth and the African Burial Ground National Monument in New York City remain the only two sites in the country conclusively proven through DNA to contain African remains. The 13 found that October day are among what is believed to be as many as 200 Africans buried in the area extending across Court Street and into the area beyond — the outskirts of the city during the days of slavery. Many were probably slaves, some were undoubtedly free, all came to this country against their will.

Soon after the discovery, the African Burying Ground Committee was formed to discuss ways to memorialize these people. Following a nationwide search, the committee chose Atlanta-based sculptor Jerome Meadows to design the memorial park — officially named “We Stand in Honor of Those Forgotten.” Central to the park is a wall that will have Mother Africa on one side, a Portsmouth slave on the other, their hands almost touching along the wall's edge.

The cost of the park was pegged at \$1.2 million, and the committee, along with its hard working fund-raising committee, got to work. The city itself donated \$250,000, among the most generous of contributors. Unfortunately, the 2008 recession slowed the process, and it has taken many years for all of the money to be raised. But today, \$1.1 million in cash and in-kind donations are in hand, and city officials are feeling very confident that will be enough to get the project off the ground.

We are so very impressed by the hard work, integrity and commitment of the committee and city officials to ensure this park becomes a reality, and we are humbled by those who have given as little as \$10 to as much as \$10,000 or more to the cause.

This memorial park will indeed stand as a testament to those who have been forgotten. It will serve as a beacon to African Americans from throughout the region and the country, it will be a place where schoolchildren can come to learn the forgotten history of their state and it will be a dignified resting place for so many. We look forward to the city's progress in the next few months, and feel certain that we will be seeing ground broken on this important monument in the months to come.