

Burying Ground memorial about future



TOWARD
HIGHER IDEALS
JIM SPLAINE

When I was a little guy, and we're talking a long time ago, like in the mid-1950s, Chestnut Street was my hiding place and escape away from home.

I grew up in a three-story on the corner of Deer and Bridge streets, to the right of where the VFW still stands. It was a vibrant neighborhood, with urban renewal still a decade in the future. Downtown was much different, even to the two-way traffic on Congress Street.

My Mom, who by then had already lost three young sons, was especially careful with me. It wasn't that we feared other people. Those were the days we never locked our front doors.

But she expected to know where I was at all times, like to the minute. And going beyond Congress Street was a no-no unless she knew exactly where. One place she'd always approve was the Civic Theater on a Saturday or Sunday. That was on Chestnut Street.

Thing was, I didn't always use the 25 cents, the price of an afternoon matinee ticket with popcorn, the way she intended. Half the time, with a couple of neighborhood friends, we would use our ticket money to buy penny candy, then spend the afternoon with a friend who lived a few buildings up from the theater.

While we were supposed to be seeing a movie, we'd play in his backyard, sometimes throw catch, rolled marbles or flipped cards for the candy (I often won and put on weight), and chalked out "hopscotch" in the middle of the street. Fortunately, other than asking whether I liked the movie, Mom never asked for plot details.

Little did we know that we were playing over the graves of some of Portsmouth's earliest forgotten heroes in what is now known to be the African Burying Ground, some of whom may have been slaves from the



STAFF FILE PHOTO

Local historian Valerie Cunningham has been a driving force in the effort to create a memorial at the African Burying Ground in Portsmouth.

years of slave trade dating back 300, even 400 years.

There is an ongoing effort by dedicated citizens to fund a memorial on Chestnut Street for what may be hundreds of African slaves buried under the streets, sidewalks, and perhaps homes and driveways of that neighborhood. It is a cause that deserves the support of all of us. Because it is, and will become, much more than just a memorial.

I saw the beginning stages of this effort up close and personal. Almost a decade ago, I was on the first African Burying Ground Committee,

which was initially chaired by City Councilor John Hynes. It had some of Portsmouth's finest visionaries, some of whom are still on the committee, including Vernis Jackson, Mary Bailey and Valerie Cunningham.

John's greatest contribution was something that he did with finesse and the skill of a diplomat. There were a number of divergent suggestions on how to go about creating a proper memorial, and some of the residents and building owners on Chestnut Street were understandably concerned about what any plan would do for their access and use of their

property.

John chaired a number of interactive public dialogues, including several on-site tours, where we invited concerns of abutters and others. Some of those meetings were heated, to say the least, but with patience and calm he was able to get the beginnings of a mutual understanding and consensus that this was more than just about a small part of downtown or a "group" of people long gone. It was about all of us.

And now with the citizens and leaders involved in this project, it is in their good hands. Through the years

they have massaged a design and plan that is beautiful in its natural simplicity, yet powerful in its message. For decades — even centuries — it will be a living and ever-growing testimony that human beings care about who other human beings are.

It will be a place where those who follow us can walk or sit to reflect about our past, and envision what we can become. That in a very real sense we respect each other best by remembering each other well. Our past history and what it has taught us means little if it doesn't mean something for our present-day lives, and for our future.

And indeed, the African Burying Ground Memorial is really about our future. Those who are in their sacred resting place there provided to us the gift of our diversity. By creating a memorial, we're not just expressing our appreciation and respect for those who lay there; we're building a meditative place where we can remind ourselves of what our history — their history — has taught us so far in our human adventure.

It is pondering and exploring our past that provides the most powerful and important lessons for the people of our tomorrows.

Today's quote: "Learn from the past." — the meaning of the West African sankofa symbol that will be placed on a sealed vault at the memorial which will contain some of the remains.

Today's thought: As a gift to yourself and your future, visit www.africanburyinggroundnh.org to learn about the memorial, and to see what you can do to help.

Next time: Return Rail Passenger Service To Portsmouth.

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