

The Square Magazine

PEOPLE

PORTSMOUTH BUILDS MEMORIAL IN HONOR OF THOSE FORGOTTEN TWELVE YEARS IN THE MAKING, THE AFRICAN BURYING GROUND MEMORIAL IN PORTSMOUTH BRINGS A COMMUNITY'S VISION TO LIFE

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by J.L. Stevens

photos by David J. Murray



The Portsmouth community stands at the African Burying Ground site with candlelight, listening to a gospel song by the Soweto Gospel Choir of South Africa.

When city contractors unearthed the crumbling remains of wooden coffins on Oct. 7, 2003, in the area that old maps of Portsmouth marked as the “Negro Burying Ground,” it appeared that this city — 91.5 percent Caucasian — had an undiscovered history.

If you walk to this spot on Chestnut Street today, just a short walk from Market Square, you will see a placard stating “In Honor of Those Forgotten.” A dozen years and \$1.2 million after the initial discovery of the burying ground, Portsmouth is making the final preparations to honor, with artwork and a rebur-

al ceremony, what early maps signify could be the remains of almost 200 Africans and African-descended people who lay in unmarked graves.

The backbone of the project is the African Burying Ground Committee, which the city formed in 2004 with the involvement of prominent members of the local African-American community. Five members of the original committee remain: Vernis Jackson as committee chair; Mary Bailey, committee vice chair; Kelvin Edwards, current president of Seacoast African American Cultural Center; Portsmouth native Valerie Cunningham; and City Councilor Chris Dwyer. Up until the end of 2014,



A bird's-eye view of the park under construction

Jackson also served as president of the Seacoast African American Cultural Center (SAACC), an institution she founded in 2000 to celebrate the lives and achievements of African-American people with an emphasis on the story of those in the Seacoast.

Jackson is an African-American Portsmouth resident who is intensely involved in the city's cultural hub. She says, "I retired from my 'for-real job' [as a teacher] in June of 2000 and in August of 2000, I did this." "This" is the SAACC, first located in the Connie Bean Center when it was located on Daniel Street. "The city gave us that room to use and we just had such great programs. Standing room only," she recounted. An integral part of that programming involved Anna Nuttall.

Nuttall, a creative soul with spiky red hair, has been a visual arts educator in the Portsmouth School Department since August 1999. She's also become something of a passionate force for the SAACC, as well as a friend to Jackson.



Every April, when the SAACC would open for the year, Nuttall and her art students would make sure the Cultural Center looked and felt ready for visitors. "For the past five years she has done some kind of project with those students that involves some kind of black history or culture. Those kids have gotten so much education. Education: 1 and 1 is 2, 'tis true. Everybody knows that. But everybody doesn't know what she is giving to them," says Jackson.



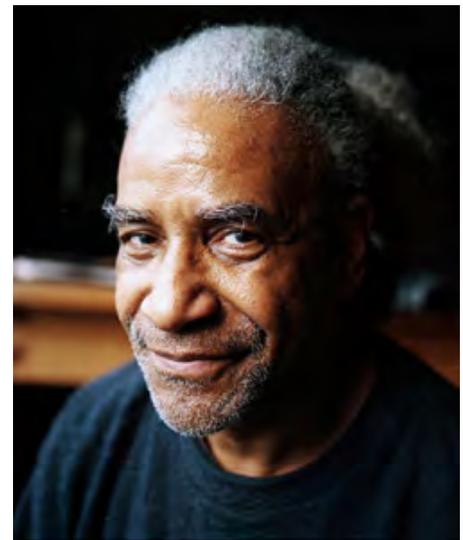
African Burying Ground Committee Chair Vernis Jackson

So it was only natural that, when the African Burying Ground Committee was putting together its plan for the memorial's artwork, that they would reach out to involve local schoolchildren and that Nuttall, along with art teacher Deirdre Shea, would play a key role.

In 2007 the committee proposed that the African Burying Ground Memorial Park should be identified with iconic art, marking it as a sacred spot with West African cultural roots. The title, "We Stand in Honor of Those Forgotten," would set the theme. Sculptor and artist Jerome Meadows of Savannah, Georgia, and Roberta Woodburn, a landscape architect from Newmarket, were key participants in the design of the park.

In October of 2014, Portsmouth Middle School students from Nuttall's and Shea's eighth-grade art classes embarked on an artistic journey that went deeper than the two-dimensional designs they were about to draw. While the artist's proposal required an educational component, Nuttall says, "It didn't have to be installing artwork, it could have been Jerome coming in and working with us in some other capacity. It's kind of cool that the kids are really going to be able to leave a piece there."

The 88 students worked with the visiting artist on designing tiles at six inches by six inches, which will ultimately be five inch by five inch ceramic tiles. "Jerome's going to take their designs and print them and then fabricate them onto the ceramic tile. Basically he'll fire their design on the ceramic tile and that's what will be installed," Nuttall explains.



Artist Jerome Meadows

Shea adds that, while they students were working on the Ghanaian-based designs, it "really seemed like the focus was on turning something negative into something positive. It was involving younger people and that was important to him. It's not just about the past; it was about the future too."

The students all had different perspectives to bring to the class. Shea says, "I have a boy whose driveway is on that street, so he was really excited." Nuttall adds that homeowners on the street have been very positive about the project.

The design is related to the Kente cloth tradition as far as symbolism of color and motif, "so the students had a nice conversation about art as a method of communication and the really deep roots of art as a visual language," says Nuttall. The other motif used in the tile design was the Adinkra, a set of African symbols "some of them actually remembered from Harriet Tubman, who they studied in elementary school and how she would embed some of those symbols along the Underground Railroad."

“Jerome did a really nice job focusing on art as a language; art has a message. You’re saying something with what you create. You’re expressing something with your connection to this project. He did a really great job talking about public art and what it is and the goal of any kind of public art,” Nuttall says.

Shea adds, “And that it’s not just for you anymore: It’s for everybody.”

“My favorite quote,” Nuttall says, “was from a sixth-grade girl, who said, ‘So, public art is just like public speaking, except it’s there 24 hours a day.’ I was like, ‘Yes, brilliant!’”

The brilliance of the project is not lost on Jackson.

“I talk about it all the time when I’m traveling; I’m so proud of my community,” Jackson says. “For this community, which has a small minority population, to have an African American Cultural Center. For it to have the Portsmouth Black Heritage Trail, all of those visuals all around town, and then for them to have this project; where you have these groups of people like the abutters, the people who live on the street who have been living over those graves all this time, the archaeologist who worked on identifying what was there, the sculptor and artist, and Anna Nuttall, who has just been a jewel working with those kids.”

Another jewel that Jackson cannot say enough about is Portsmouth Community Development Director David Moore. “He has been the guiding force for this project. He has done so much and he’s unbelievable,” says Jackson.

As project manager for the African Burying Ground Memorial Project, Moore says that the greatest message the project will have for future generations will be “the street closure, the memorial, its artwork, the careful way we have treated the remains, and the decade-long process to get to this point not only honors the as many as 200 people buried beneath the street, but it will endure as a message to the future that it is right and necessary to look back and acknowledge our failings. Inevitably, the same dis-



Portsmouth Middle School art teachers Anna Nuttall and Deirdre Shea worked with artist Jerome Meadows and middle school students to create tiles for the memorial park.

cussion will cause us to look around — now and in the future — and ask who we are at risk of treating unjustly.”

As for Jackson, the African Burying Ground Memorial Park is also very personal. “It’s personal for me to see that somebody cares. Somebody cares,” she emphasizes. “And in this community, where the minority population is so small, it’s more personal for me to see that the whole community cares, and that they show it. They didn’t just care and sit back — they really showed it.”

Celebrate the completion of the Memorial Park

From May 20-May 23, there will be a series of community events that commemorate the opening of the African Burying Ground Memorial Park, including an artist talk by Jerome Meadows, an ancestral vigil, a reburial ceremony and a public celebration. For locations and times, visit africanburying-groundnh.org.

Want to learn more about Portsmouth’s ties to African-American history?

Explore the Portsmouth Black Heritage Trail, which is celebrating its 20th anniversary this year. For information on upcoming events and the history of the trail, visit portsmouthhistory.org/portsmouth-black-heritage-trail.

Take the Portsmouth Black Heritage Trail self-guided tour, featuring 24 locations from the Wharf at Prescott Park to St. John’s Parish Hall, Chapel Street: portsmouthhistory.org/self-guided-tour
Learn more about the Seacoast African American Cultural Center founded by Vernis Jackson: saacc-nh.org

Read more about the Portsmouth African Burying Ground project including its history, the design, updates and how to make a donation to the project: africanburyinggroundnh.org

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