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African history remembered in New Hampshire

18th-century African cemetery is rededicated

By Jill Terreri Ramos Globe Correspondent May 23, 2015

PORTSMOUTH, N.H. — The long history of Africans in this city was memorialized Saturday when the remains of eight who lived here in the 18th century were given a final resting place.

After years of planning, a memorial park at the site of what is believed to be the oldest African burial ground in New England was unveiled. A ceremony was held to honor the lives of those eight people and about 200 others, both enslaved and free. Speakers emphasized the humanity of those buried there and remembered their suffering.

“When you want to find peace and tranquillity and remember . . . you can come here,” Oscar Mokeme, founder and executive director of the Museum of African Art and Culture in Portland, Maine, told a crowd gathered for the ceremony.

Nine caskets containing the remains of eight Africans and miscellaneous remains that were found on the site were brought through the crowd and placed in the ground.

“They had all of the human qualities that people have today,” Valerie Cunningham, an expert on black history in New Hampshire, said after the ceremony. “They had families, not only the families they had to leave in Africa but the families that they made here.”

The space on Chestnut Street between State and Court streets was long known to be an African burial ground, so when Portsmouth officials were planning to dig up the street during a public works project, they called Cunningham for guidance. And when the work was underway and the remains were discovered in 2003, they called Cunningham again. DNA testing and forensic archeology determined the remains were of African descent.

The community raised \$1.2 million to reclaim the paved area to memorialize the Africans buried there.

A crowd of adults and children, many with cameras in hand, filled the 7,500-square-foot memorial park on a sunny but chilly morning, angling for the best views.

The park, on a downtown street, includes a circular burial site into which nine caskets were placed, markers explaining Africans’ history in Portsmouth, two sculptures representing the first

slave in Portsmouth and Mother Africa, as well as figures representing the “contemporary community,” said artist and sculptor Jerome Meadows.

Oscar Mokeme prayed over the caskets during the ceremony.

The memorial also includes a “petition line” embedded in the ground, bearing words written by 20 Africans in 1779 petitioning the New Hampshire government for their freedom.

“Enact such laws,” they wrote, “whereby we may regain our liberty and be ranked in the class of free agents and that the name of slave may not be heard in a land gloriously contending for the sweets of freedom.”

They did not live to see the petition signed, though six were granted their freedom during their lifetime. Governor Maggie Hassan signed the petition in 2013.

“This petition line represents that past being brought into the future . . . by way of the petition being finally signed,” Meadows said.

The remains of five other Africans buried near the memorial were not disturbed, Cunningham said. The burial ground was in use as early as 1705, according to municipal records.

Those in attendance were urged to learn more about those buried underneath their feet.

“It is still in front of us to find out who they were and to pay homage to the life that they lived, the economy they powered, and the kindness they displayed in the face of utter horror,” said Beverly A. Morgan-Welch, executive director of the Museum of African American History of Boston and Nantucket.

The memorial reminds people that the history of Africans in America is a long one, said Edie Butler, who traveled to Portsmouth from Henniker for the ceremony. Butler’s African-American family has roots in South Carolina that date back to the 1700s, but she said she has felt like a guest at times, even an intruder in this country.

“Across racial lines, it’s important for everyone to know how deeply rooted, literally in this case, the history of African people is in this country, that there’s no sense in our feeling apologetic about being here, which too many people seem to feel that we maybe should be,” she said.

At the end of the ceremony, after much of the crowd had dispersed, Sally Hirshberg, who lives in nearby Kittery, Maine, was standing at the memorial, where the sculpture of a man not much taller than her stood in front of a stone wall. His eyes are downcast and his life-like features finely drawn.

“You relate to it as a human being,” Hirshberg said. “It’s incredibly moving.”

The sculpture's fingers reach around a granite wall, but do not touch the sculpture of a woman on the other side who faces in the opposite direction. Seeing the hands of each sculpture near each other had a strong effect on Hirshberg, she said.

"I felt like a huge truck hit me," she said.

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