

NEW HAMPSHIRE UNION LEADER

Portsmouth slaves honored, reburied

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A male figure depicting the first African to arrive in Portsmouth in 1645 sits at the entrance to the new African Burying Ground Memorial in Portsmouth. (Jason Schreiber/Union Leader Correspondent)

PORTSMOUTH - Wooden caskets were carried down a path to a vault in the sacred ground that had long been forgotten.

One by one, the pine caskets were carefully placed into the vault to the thumping sound of drum beats.

"Tears of joy, that's exactly what it is for me," said Vernis Jackson, chairwoman of Portsmouth's African Burying Ground Committee who has waited 12 years for the human remains exhumed in 2003 to be reburied.

A much-anticipated reburial ceremony was held Saturday morning to properly return the remains to the earth before hundreds of people - black and white.

The ceremony featured traditional African burial customs and marked the opening of the new \$1.2 million Portsmouth African Burying Ground Memorial Park.

Jackson hopes the memorial will become a mecca for people around the country.

"I want people to come and share in this experience of being here and seeing what can happen," she said.

The 6,500-square-foot memorial park was created on what was once a part of Chestnut Street between Court and State streets.

Planning for the park began after the African Burying Ground was rediscovered in 2003 when the city was working on an infrastructure project and pieces of wooden coffins with the remains of 13 people were found buried there.

With assistance from the state archeologist, remains were exhumed for further examination with plans for them to one day be returned.

DNA testing revealed that the remains belonged to people of African descent. As many as 200

people are believed to be buried in the graveyard that dates to the 1700s and was once known as the "Negro Burying Ground."

According to project officials, it is the only African Burial Ground from that era in New England but over time was forgotten as the city grew and the ground was paved over.

Researchers weren't able to determine the exact number of those who were slaves and those who were free at the time of their burial.

Census records show there were 70 slaves in New Hampshire by 1708 and the number grew to 656 by 1775. Most of those slaves lived along the coast.

The Portsmouth City Council established the African Burying Ground Committee in 2004 and charged its members with finding a way to properly honor those who were buried under Chestnut Street.

Since then, the committee worked to develop a plan and raise money for the project.

Sculptor and artist Jerome Meadows of Georgia was commissioned to design the park and fabricate several figures that were unveiled during Saturday's ceremony.

A male figure on a monument at the entrance to the park depicts the first African who was brought to Portsmouth in 1645. On the opposite side of the monument is Mother Africa, who represents strength and determination.

The hands of the two figures reach around the monument toward each other.

Meadows said the most challenging artistic component was designing the face of the male figure at the entrance.

"I already have a pretty good understanding of what slavery must have been like, but I was now confronted with someone who I'm seeing as an individual person and what must he have been going through," he said.

Meadows wanted the figure to have a sense of strength and hope, but he also had to knowledge the anger he likely felt at the time.

Beverly Morgan-Welch, chief executive of the Museum of African History in Boston and Nantucket, told the story of how slaves arrived in New England and said it's important for people to know the history of those who were buried under the street.

"You don't simply rip someone from their loved ones arms and make them disappear from history," she said.

Morgan-Welch added, "As we celebrate this country's liberty and freedom and justice in documents that are beautiful to understand and live out, we have to understand that that freedom

has not been afforded to everyone. We must understand this history or we continue to be confounded by how we live together," she said.

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