



By Stephanie Woods

Remains of former slaves buried in Portsmouth

City dedicates new memorial park for 13 former slaves found in 2003

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The coffins of 13 former slaves were discovered in 2003 when city workers dug up the road during a water project on Chestnut Street.

The city has converted the discovery site to the New African Burial Ground Memorial Park and held an unveiling ceremony Saturday.

West African drummers played as organizers brought wooden caskets to a vault in the middle of the memorial park.

The park was a burial site for African slaves in the 18th century. Valeria Cunningham, the founder of Portsmouth Black Heritage Trail, says her organization wants history to remember these people as individuals, not just as slaves.

“There is no such thing as a slave that is a job description,” Cunningham said.

Jerrienne Boggis, the director of Portsmouth Black Heritage Trail, says New Hampshire residents are finally honoring the sacrifices of the former slaves.

“They had a rough life, being torn away from what they knew, and but they made a life for themselves,” Boggis said.

Chief Oscar Makimi from Portland, Maine led the burial ceremony. He covered the caskets with earth from Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Guinea, and Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

Chestnut Street is now closed to traffic and transformed into a 7,500 square foot commemorative park. Portsmouth residents say they like the change.

“Honoring them instead of paving over them and forgetting them, it's very touching,” said Portsmouth resident Cheri Dennett.

Jerome Meadows, the artist who designed the park, sees this as an important chance to start a new chapter.

“Portsmouth is doing a very major thing in connecting a lot of dots and bringing forth the possibility of a dialogue that will make a huge difference,” Meadows said.

Organizers believe at least 200 people are still buried under Chestnut Street. They hope DNA testing of the remains that were discovered will offer more insight into the other former slaves' heritage.

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

LIVE IN LONDONDERRY, SUZANNE ROUNTREE, WMUR NEWS 9.
STEPHANIE: DOZENS OF PEOPLE GATHERED IN PORTSMOUTH TODAY FOR A SPECIAL CEREMONY TO BURY THE REMAINS OF 13 FORMER SLAVES. THEIR COFFINS WERE DISCOVERED BACK IN 2003 WHEN CITY WORKERS DUG UP THE ROAD DURING A WATER PROJECT. THE SPOT HAS NOW BECOME THE NEW AFRICAN BURIAL GROUND MEMORIAL PARK WHERE THE CEREMONY TOOK PLACE. WMUR'S KRIA SAKAKEENY JOINS US LIVE FROM PORTSMOUTH WITH MORE ON WHAT TODAY'S CEREMONY MEANT FOR THE COMMUNITY. KRIA: IT MEANT A LOT. PEOPLE FROM ALL OVER NEW ENGLAND CAME FOR THIS CEREMONY-AND WE'RE TOLD THAT VOLUNTEERS KEPT VIGIL OVER THE CASKETS LAST NIGHT AND INTO THE MORNING UNTIL THESE PEOPLE WERE FINALLY LAID TO REST. TO THE BEAT OF WEST AFRICAN DRUMS, VOLUNTEERS BROUGHT WOODEN CASKETS TO A VAULT IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NEW AFRICAN BURIAL GROUND MEMORIAL PARK. CHESTNUT STREET HERE IN PORTSMOUTH WAS A BURIAL SITE FOR AFRICAN SLAVES IN THE 1700'S BUT WAS COVERED OVER, AND FEW KNEW ABOUT IT UNTIL REMAINS WERE DISCOVERED IN 2003. ORGANIZERS WANT TO BE SURE HISTORY REMEMBERS THESE PEOPLE AS INDIVIDUALS NOT JUST AS SLAVES. VALERIA CUNNINGHAM: THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS A SLAVE -- THAT IS A JOB DESCRIPTION. JERRIANNE BOGGIS: THEY HAD A ROUGH LIFE BEING TORN AWAY FROM WHAT THEY KNEW AND BUT THEY MADE A LIFE FOR THEMSELVES. KRIA: CHIEF OSCAR MAKIMI FROM PORTLAND, MAINE LED THE BURIAL CEREMONY -- COVERING THE CASKETS WITH EARTH FROM NIGERIA, ZIMBABWE, GUINIE, AND PORTSMOUTH, NEW HAMPSHIRE. CHERI DENNETT: HONORING THEM INSTEAD OF PAVING OVER THEM AND FORGETTING THEM -- IT'S VERY TOUCHING. KRIA: NOW CHESTNUT STREET IS CLOSED TO TRAFFIC AND HAS BEEN TRANSFORMED TO A 7,500 SQUARE FOOT COMMEMORATIVE PARK. THE ARTIST WHO DESIGNED THE PARK -- SEES THIS AS AN IMPORTANT CHANCE TO START A NEW CHAPTER. JEROME MEADOWS: PORTSMOUTH IS DOING A VERY MAJOR THING IN MY

ESTIMATION. IN CONNECTING A LOT OF DOTS AND BRINGING FORTH THE POSSIBILITY OF A DIALOGUE THAT WILL MAKE A HUGE DIFFERENCE.
KRIA: AT LEAST 200 PEOPLE ARE STILL BURIED UNDER CHESTNUT STREET -- AND THE HOPE IS DNA TESTING FROM THE REMAINS THAT WERE DISCOVERED WILL OFFER MORE INSIGHT TO EXACTLY WHERE IN AFRICA THEY WERE FROM. LIVE IN PORTSMOUTH, KRIA