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A collaboration between the Portsmouth African Burying Ground Committee and 3S Artspace has produced informational signs on Chestnut Street to raise awareness and give information in honor of those forgotten. From left are Eric Weinrieb of Altus Engineering, Matthew Lonek and James Brewer of TD Bank, Elisa Holben and Chris Greiner of 3S Artspace, and Mary Bailey and Vernis Jackson of the African Burying Ground Committee.

# Burying ground marked

*Signs tell tale of 18th century African community, gravesite*

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PORTSMOUTH — No longer will the city's African Burying Ground on Chestnut Street go unmarked.

Visitors and residents alike can now walk up to virtually every building on the short street and learn about the gravesite and the Africans buried there. This week, a series of signs were installed on the buildings that describe just a little about the African community in 18th century Portsmouth and the burying ground where as many as 200 are interred.

According to African Burying Ground Committee Chairwoman Vernis Jackson, the signs will serve as a potent reminder of the city's slave past until a planned memorial park can be built sometime in the next few years.

"People would come to the (Seacoast African American Cultural) Center and learn about the burying ground, and then come over to Chestnut Street and say, 'I don't see a thing,'" she said. "They won't be able to say that any more."

The signs are red and yellow and are topped with the West African sankofa symbol, which looks like a stylized heart. The symbol is often associated with the proverb, "It is not wrong to go back for that which you have forgotten." Each sign provides a snippet of information about the site or the city's African residents.

"In 1760," reads one, "Portsmouth town records refer to this site as the 'Negro Burying Yard.' Over time, as Portsmouth grew, the African Burying Ground was paved over, built over and overlooked."

The sign project resulted from a collaboration between

the African Burying Ground Committee and 3S Artspace, which is working to open a performance space on Vaughan Street. 3S Artspace co-founder Chris Greiner said the organization was looking to collaborate with other city nonprofits and was happy to oblige when approached about providing expertise for the signs.

"I was working at The Music Hall in 2003," he said, "and I remember distinctly the day when the gravesite was uncovered" by workers doing routine utility work. "You'd have to have a pretty cold heart not to be touched by this place. And this project is perfect for us, because it intersects arts and the community."

Board member Elisa Holben, a graphic artist, designed the signs. "It's great to have the support of the whole neighborhood," she said.

Jackson said she was struck by the resemblance of the sankofa to a key. "It's like a key to the burying ground. We're opening it up to the public to learn more," she said.