

City's black heritage highlighted

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PORTSMOUTH—Valerie Cunningham looked at the small knot of people circled around her one morning this week.

"I am going to tell you this morning about Portsmouth's African American history," said Cunningham, the creator of the Portsmouth Black Heritage Trail.

"I will not be talking about the history of white people in Portsmouth," she said,

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Valerie Cunningham speaks to a group in Portsmouth about the Black Heritage Trail and the city's history of slavery.



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Valerie Cunningham speaks to a group at Prescott Park near the Sheafe House, where slaves sailed to the shore and then were sold. The Black Heritage Trail runs throughout Portsmouth.

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adding that while much is known about the city's white forebears, too little attention has been placed on its African American heritage.

There were nods all around, as the members of the African Burying Ground fund-raising committee took a tour of the sites on the heritage trail with Cunningham as their guide.

The group was also joined by City Councilor Chris Dwyer, Community Development Director David Moore and Deputy City Manager Cindy Hayden.

The committee is beginning its work to raise \$1 million for a monument at the Chestnut Street site of the burying ground, where perhaps as many as 200 slaves are interred.

The tour of the heritage trail sites was intended to acquaint, or further acquaint, the committee with the city's black history.

Cunningham, who is also a member of the African Burying Ground Committee, reminded her group that "a number of Portsmouth ship-

builders were involved in the transatlantic slave trade" during the 17th and 18th centuries.

Prescott Park was underwater at the time and called the Puddledock area, and Africans and West Indians would disembark at Long Wharf to be sold mostly at taverns in the city, she said.

The New Hampshire Gazette, printed at the corner of Pleasant and Howard streets, regularly carried ads for slaves, she added.

"People preferred young boys because they were strong workers — 9, 10 years old. Old enough to be trained, young enough to be taken away from their parents," Cunningham said.

Slavery died out in the city around 1800, "not by law, but by custom. It was not outlawed in the state of New Hampshire," she said. But Portsmouth ships "still engaged in the business of transporting Africans and goods."

As they walked with Cunningham, listening to the story of the early Africans in Portsmouth, asking questions along

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Valerie Cunningham

the way, some of the members reflected on their decision to become involved in the burying ground project.

New Castle resident Janet Prince said she was in the audience at a City Council meeting when the burying ground memorial was discussed.

"I was incredibly moved by the spirit of the project," she said. "It's calling me. It's that simple. I've lived here 30 years, and I never pondered the question of where black people lived, how they lived."

Standing in front of the former children's museum on South Street, Cunning-

ham said it was the site of the first black church in New Hampshire, People's Baptist Church. For years, the church celebrated the Emancipation Proclamation on Jan. 1, using funds set aside by a city minister specifically for that purpose.

"Maybe we should start it again," said Dwyer, a member of the African Burying Ground Committee.

Dwyer said there were "so many reasons" why the memorial was important, "and one of the very basic is that under New Hampshire law, the city has a responsibility for its burying places.

"It's also so important to get a complete picture of Portsmouth's history, and this is a huge part of that history," she said.

