

HONORING THOSE AT BURYING GROUND

■ *Consecration ceremony to be held ahead of park construction*

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PORTSMOUTH — Before work begins Monday on the African Burying Ground Memorial Park, it is important to take time to honor the ancestors interred there and to consecrate that “sacred ground.”

Portsmouth African American historian Valerie Cunningham said she has had the city’s African forebears in mind as she has worked to create a consecration ceremony this Sunday, Aug. 17, on the Chestnut Street site of the park.

“This is very important,” she said. “We need to make some spiritual connections with the people buried there, with the ancestors.”

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BURYING GROUND: Ceremony set

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Construction work begins Monday to create a memorial park to remember as many as 200 Africans from the 18th and 19th centuries who were buried in what was then an open field on the city's outskirts.

The park will include a vault to reinter the remains of eight of 13 individuals who were discovered during routine utilities work in 2003. The remaining five were left

undisturbed.

Cunningham, a member of the African American Burying Ground Committee, said when she learned recently that work was to begin, she knew that a ceremony had to be held beforehand.

"We are going into that ground again. Before that begins, it's important to stop for a moment to bring peace not only to the ancestors, but also to us," she said.

The ceremony will include a calling of the names of known enslaved people in the Seacoast region. Cunningham, the author of "Black Portsmouth," and David Watters, director of the University of New Hampshire Center for New England Culture, who have long been studying slavery in the Granite State, have compiled the list.

Those who are attending will have the opportunity to participate in the calling of names, she said.

Oscar Mokeme, director of the Museum of African Culture in Portland, Maine, is offering a traditional West African consecration ritual.

According to Cunningham, this involves a cleansing or purification ceremony. Mokeme will mix three waters — rain, ocean and spring water — and community members will be invited to add a pinch of salt, which is part of funeral processions in Africa, she said.

COMING SUNDAY

Those involved in the creation of the African Burying Ground Memorial Park talk about the journey that brought them to today, and the importance of the park to future residents of Portsmouth.

The ceremony will also include African drumming, singing led by the Rev. Dr. Lillian Buckley of Kittery, Maine, and remarks by committee members and area clergy.

According with African funeral tradition, Cunningham said, those attending are invited to wear white or African clothing, and to bring white flowers, which will be scattered on the roadway.

Chestnut Street will be closed beginning at 3 p.m., and the 4 p.m. ceremony is expected to last about an hour.

The reopening of the ground for the first time in 11 years "stirs up a lot of emotional stuff on a level that sometimes we don't even realize we have. It's important to take some time to reflect on where we are before we go forward," Cunningham said.

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