

Long-ago souls inspire us to higher ideals

We could not be more proud of our city and more honored to call Portsmouth home than we are today, as the city readies to embark on construction of the African Burying Ground Memorial Park.

This is truly a day to be grateful, for the grit and spiritual determination of countless individuals who have brought this project to reality. It is a day to celebrate the legacy of a city and its residents who, clear eyed, looked back at their slave-holding past and said, “No longer. That history cannot define the present or foretell the future.” It is a day to acknowledge the regional and national importance of the burying ground. This memorial will serve as a beacon to African-Americans from throughout the region and the country, it will be a place where schoolchildren can come to learn the forgotten history of their city, state and nation, and it will be a dignified resting place for so many.

It is also a day to pause and reflect that we as a nation still have a long way to go. Make no mistake, African-Americans throughout our country continue today to endure discrimination and worse. While the details and the motivations of the events in Ferguson, Missouri, last week will ultimately be decided in a court of law, it is clear that unarmed black teenager Michael Brown was fatally shot by a police officer — sparking a week of protest by the African-American community there and around the country. To be black in America can be to be suspect. And do not for a minute think that even though they live in Seacoast New Hampshire, local African-Americans do not feel the pain of their brethren, do not get angry or fearful or feel a tightening in their gut when they hear about someone like Michael Brown. Do not think it is not personal. This country is, said President Obama in his 2008 speech on race, in “a racial stalemate we’ve been stuck in for years.” But he strikes a hopeful note, too, that “working together, we can move beyond some of our old racial wounds, and that in fact we have no choice if we are to continue on the path of a more perfect union.”

And so we come full circle to the burying ground. That day in 2003 the remains of 13 Africans were found underneath Chestnut Street, this predominantly white city could have chosen as their forebears did before them to forget them once more. But they did not. They chose to treat the remains with the respect they deserve, removing them in a funeral hearse. Led by the strong voices and determination of local African-American leaders, the city formed a burying ground committee and worked toward creating a dignified memorial park where all can pause to reflect on “our old racial wounds” and find ways to move beyond them.

A poem penned by sculptor and park designer Jerome Meadows, “We Stand in Honor of Those Forgotten,” will be etched into statues that represent the hundreds of nameless, faceless people who are interred at the burying ground. In each word, we find people like Vernis Jackson, Mary Bailey, Valerie Cunningham, Kelvin Edward, all African-American Seacoast residents, all members of the African Burying Ground Committee. We see Community Development Director David Moore, who has spent countless hours shepherding this project through hurdles big and small, and City Councilor Chris Dwyer, who has lent her voice and her support to this project. We see the indefatigable spirit of fund-raising committee members Janet Prince, Stephanie Seacord, Jane James, Tracey Clarkson, George and Sue Carlisle, Nike Speltz and Morey Goodman. In each word, we find the names of the many individuals, organizations, foundations and businesses that contributed funding in amounts large and small to ensure this park was built. We thank all those mentioned here and so many others.