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Consecration prepares for memorial park

By Faiz Siddiqui | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT AUGUST 18, 2014



MARK LORENZ/BOSTON GLOBE

Oscar Ogugua Mokeme performed an ancestral dance at the African Burying Ground Memorial Park consecration Sunday.

PORTSMOUTH, N.H. — The masked figure danced to the pulse of African drumming, as the shell shakers tied around his ankles played a beat of their own.

Oscar Ogugua Mokeme brushed the threads of a long baton against the heads and faces of dozens gathered on Chestnut Street in memory of the deceased. The remains of as many as 200 slaves lie beneath the ground along this narrow street, where Mokeme performed a ritual

dance for the unknown, wearing a 300-year-old mask said to celebrate pain and pleasure, death and life.

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“We don’t know what killed these people,” said Mokeme, the founder and director of the Museum of African Culture in Portland, Maine. “We don’t know their disease. We don’t know their names. But we know there are many.”

About 200 people gathered on Chestnut Street on Sunday afternoon for a consecration at the site where remains believed to be those of slaves were discovered a decade ago. Work will begin Monday on a memorial at the site, where construction workers in 2003 found 13 wooden coffins beneath Chestnut and State streets and nearby homes and businesses.

Vernis Jackson, chairwoman of the Mayor’s Blue Ribbon Committee on the African Burying Ground, said the memorial will serve as a type of closure for the deceased, buried centuries ago before homes and businesses sprouted.

“They have been here so long,” she said. “More than 200 years. In my view, it’s a completion of their journey.”

Set to be finished in mid-November, the \$1.2-million memorial park will occupy a blocklong section of Chestnut Street. When completed, visitors will find a winding path displaying excerpts of the petition calling for the slaves’ freedom, along with statues depicting African adults and children, free and enslaved, who lived in Portsmouth. A bronze burial vault will sit below a paved plaza, containing the remains of the 13 people discovered. It is estimated that up to 200 bodies remain buried under roads and buildings in the area.

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In one of the planned statue arrangements, two figures reach toward each other around a granite slab. One is a robed woman, standing tall with a hand resting on her belly. The other is a burly man, staring outward and wearing work clothes reminiscent of the late 17th century.

Their hands extend toward each other, but they do not touch. The figures, representing Mother Africa and the first African slave recorded in Portsmouth, are separated by a painful chapter in history.

“This provides an opportunity for people to understand better what the real story is about Africans in America,” said Valerie Cunningham, a historian with the Portsmouth Black Heritage Trail. “Everything bad, and everything awful and painful didn’t happen someplace

else. It happened here too.”

Stephanie Seacord, a member of a volunteer committee spearheading the project, said the project is necessary in a state where just 1 percent of residents are African-American, and which was the last US state to recognize the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday.

“Our history reflects all of the challenges that the country does,” she said. “Slavery was part of both our life and our economy in the Colonial era. So coming to grips with that history is important to the 21st century.”

Those attending Sunday’s consecration wore white clothing and African garb for the ceremony, displaying roses and flower arrangements in memory of the interred.

Attendees sang traditional spirituals, including “Wade in the Water” and “Kumbaya.” Some wept as they heard the names of the slaves believed to have lived in Portsmouth read over the chiming of bells.

“Cat Warner . . . Cipio Hubbard . . . child of Becky Quint . . . child of Quam Quint. . .”

Mokeme splashed water on the crowd as he performed a ritual blessing of the site. At the ceremony’s end, he poured out a large bucket of water, the liquid flowing through the street where the memorial would stand — a sign of life.

“It will always continue to flow,” he said. “It reminds us what has been, what was, and what continues to be.”

Cleone Graham of Kittery, Maine, wiped tears as she joined in the singing. Her great-grandmother owned slaves in New York City, she said, and now she owes it to people like her mixed-raced grandson to honor their history.

“It was important that I be here for him and all the enslaved people here in the past,” she said. “This was very, very moving.”

The Rev. Lillian Buckley led the crowd in hymns to close the ceremony, leaving some in tears. She said Portsmouth should be proud of its effort to correct a historical wrong.

“To think of beloved people who were individuals who were just thrown in a common space, now we can rejoice and say we did the right thing.”

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