

BURYING GROUND REPORT UNCOVERS 'MOMENT IN TIME'

■ Exhumed remains provide look at lives of past slaves and burial customs

Editor's note: This is one in a series of stories on the city's African Burying Ground, and efforts by residents to erect a memorial park to those interred there.

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PORTSMOUTH — There were eight of them, ranging in age from as young as 7 to as old as 40. Some showed evidence of the hard work they performed throughout their short lives, some had poor teeth, some had childhood diseases. All were Africans or of African descent.

This and much more was learned painstakingly by a group of archaeologists, dendrochronologists, forensic anthropologists, historians and biochemists in the wake of the discovery of remains at what was once the city's "Negro Burying Ground."

The work they performed, contained in a detailed report presented to the city of Portsmouth, provides a fascinating and detailed look at the remains of the eight identified individuals exhumed for analysis.

The bodies were discovered in 2003, when a contractor excavating for a 12-foot sewer manhole on Chestnut Street encountered the base of a coffin. That discovery sparked an archaeological investigation that spanned back to Portsmouth's early days as a slaveholding city and forward to today, as members of the African Burying Ground Committee work to erect a memorial park to honor the dead buried there.

Seacoast Sunday procured a copy of the report to give readers a more thorough understanding of what archaeologist Kathleen Wheeler calls the "time capsule" on Chestnut Street.

Negro Burying Ground

While eight bodies were removed in 2003, they were among an estimated 200 Africans buried in what was then the outskirts of Portsmouth from 1705 to the 1790s.

According to the report, Portsmouth had a much larger black population than did the state of New Hampshire as a whole in the 18th century. While between 50 and 12 percent of the state's population was black between 1767 and 1800, between 2.1 and 4.1 percent of Portsmouth's population was black.

At the time, unlike the more rural and agrarian rest of the state, Portsmouth was a well-heeled city. Its wealth "derived from the West Indies trade and privateering, and the commercial goods and booty from these ventures came in on ships along the waterfront."

In the first half of the 18th century, the report states, "several Portsmouth investors outfitted vessels to Guinea, Virginia and Barbados that carried enslaved Africans along with trade goods."

Not all black residents of the city, certainly, were slaves. According to the report, free blacks lived in Portsmouth by 1731. But Valerie Cunningham, a Portsmouth historian who wrote the book "Black Portsmouth," said the "vast majority" were enslaved.

When they died, most were almost certainly interred in the city's Negro Burying Ground — generally the area around Chestnut Street between State and Court streets. The area, the report states, "functioned on the periphery, spatially and culturally marginalized from the wharves and warehouses that represented Portsmouth's growing wealth."

In life, they were likely bought young and worked hard. Cunningham said most white people who wanted a slave "wanted to get them when they were kids. So they were working from the time they were 8, 9, 10 years old. If

you're enslaved from the time you're that age, by the time you're 30, you're worn out."

That certainly proved to be the case of the remains of the eight Africans examined in 2003.

Who they were

The remains of the bodies ranged from a nearly complete skeleton to some fragmentary bones and teeth. Still, the amount that could be learned about them was considerable.

Of the eight, four were male, one was female and three were "indeterminate." Because no buttons were found, archaeologists determined they were likely buried in a shroud, as "clothing was often passed on to living family members rather than taken out of circulation."

Wheeler, the archaeologist, is fairly convinced that one of the "indeterminate" bodies was a female; the missing and healed lower incisors in the mouth are "consistent with West African puberty rites."

One of the bodies, a young male, show signs of physical stress.

"There is evidence," the report states, "of repetitive motion at the knee and elbow joints, perhaps the result of forced manual labor in one individual."

Many had deteriorating teeth, the result of poor nutrition. The bones of several showed evidence of disease or chronic infections.

They were all buried in white pine coffins with heads to the west and feet to the east, "generally construed as Chris-

tian — but could not this same orientation be seen as one pointing toward the ancestral land of Africa?"

Wheeler said she was struck by the meticulous care taken when burying the coffins.

"The burial was the end result of usually an elaborate cultural ritual," she said. "We could tell that when they dug holes and hit bedrock, they took the trouble to gouge out the bedrock to make sure the coffins would lie flat. It was important to get it right."

Wheeler said, even now eight years after the find, she considers the investigation and analysis "one of the most exciting projects I've ever worked on as an archaeologist. Normally, you get slivers of the past. It's rare for projects to provide a full sense of a moment in time."

Wheeler said she felt honored to be part of the project. "And that's not only because it's rare and unusual. These are people who toiled and lived and died in Portsmouth. Even though they don't have names, it's proper for us to remember them."



Archaeologists Steven Roy, left, and Tony Booth of Independent Archaeological Consulting in Portsmouth excavated coffins in October 2003 at the intersection of Court and Chestnut streets in Portsmouth.

Black population in Portsmouth

Date	Total population in NH	Number of Blacks	Statewide percentage	Total population in Portsmouth	Number of Blacks	Portsmouth percentage
1767	52,700	633	1.20%	4,466	187	4.19%
1773	72,092	674	0.93%	4,372	160	3.66%
1775	81,050	656	0.81%	4,590	140	3.05%
1790	141,896	*787	0.55%	4,720	*102	2.16%
1800	183,858	864	0.47%	5,339	138	2.58%

*Counts "all other free persons" and "slaves"

Source: Green and Harrington 1981; 72, 78; Cunningham 1989; 182; First Census of the U.S.



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WOULD YOU LIKE A VOICE?

On September 29th at 6:30 pm at the Portsmouth High School Library, join your fellow citizens in a night of dialogue sponsored by Portsmouth Listens. Each of the groups will answer the question, "what are the most important issues for the next city council?" The groups will share their results with each other. The results will also be published in The Portsmouth Herald and broadcast on WSCA Portsmouth Community Radio.

Portsmouth Listens is a non-profit organization committed to being a neutral convener of study circles on city issues.

The event is free and open to anyone who lives or works in Portsmouth and wishes to participate.

Thursday, September 29
Portsmouth High School Library 6:30-9pm

www.portsmouthlistens.org