

## AFRICAN BURYING GROUND

# Proud of what Portsmouth has accomplished

“Black lives matter.” While these words are heard across America today as a rallying cry for equal justice, there has not been any time in our nation’s history that the cry “black lives matter” would not have been painfully relevant.

Our nation, in its Declaration of Independence, proclaimed: “We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness ...”

Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration, and his primary editors John Adams and Ben Franklin, were well aware that all men were not equal in Colonial America, that some men, women and children were slaves and had no rights at all. They were bought and sold like livestock and families were torn apart if it suited the slave owners’ needs.

The Constitutional Convention in 1787, when deciding the issue of how to count slaves to determine a state’s population and thus its number of representatives in Congress, determined that a slave was three-fifths of a person. The “three-fifths compromise” lasted until 1865 when the 13th Amendment put an end to slavery in America.

Despite the Emancipation Proclamation, the Union victory in the Civil War and the abolishment of slavery by the 13th Amendment, the journey for equal justice for American blacks was just beginning. Voting rights laws passed during the Reconstruction era following the Civil War were gutted in the former Confederacy as state legislatures passed “separate but equal” laws that were equal in name only. Separation of the races became the law of the land.

The valiant patriotism of black soldiers during World War II argued against unequal treatment of blacks. Jackie Robinson broke the race barrier in baseball in 1947. In *Brown versus the Board of Education*, the U.S. Supreme Court declared that school segregation violated the 14th Amendment. In 1955, Rosa Parks fought segregation on a bus in Montgomery, Ala. In 1956, the “Little Rock Nine” forced the federal government to enforce school desegregation at Central High School in Arkansas. The early 1960s saw lunch counter sit-ins, church bombings, Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I have a dream” speech, the March in Selma, Ala., and the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Violence continued but so did progress in the form of the Voting Rights Act in 1965.

With each passing decade we have seen violence and we have seen progress. Certainly the election of President Barack Obama, born of an African father and a white American mother, was a major milestone. But still in this nation there is unrest because it’s clear that in many communities we are still judged by the color of our skin rather than by the content of our character.

We have written so many editorials on Portsmouth’s African Burying Ground and yet, we have not said what may be the most important thing there is to say about this triumphant community endeavor, which is this:

In honoring those buried anonymously in the old “Negro Burying Yard” we are declaring to the world that in Portsmouth, N.H., black lives matter. The African Burying Ground Memorial Park will remind us all, for generations to come, not just of our past mistakes but of the lessons we have learned from them. Our journey has taught us that all lives matter and that all men, women and children deserve respect and dignity regardless of the color of their skin, their religious beliefs or whom they choose to love.

The community’s support of the African Burying Ground project makes us so very proud to be the hometown paper in Portsmouth.