

AFRICAN BURYING GROUND



Master furniture maker Jeffrey Cooper talks about the coffins he has built that will hold the remains of the Africans disinterred at the African Burying Ground in Portsmouth and will be placed back in the ground during the ceremony in May. He speaks of the detail and sensitivity that went into the building of the caskets. PHOTO BY DEB CRAM/SEACOASTONLINE

A proper burial

Portsmouth woodworker crafts caskets for Africans' remains

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Editor's note: This is one in a series of stories that will appear in the Portsmouth Herald and Seacoast Sunday in the next six weeks, leading up to the May 23 dedication of the African Burying Ground Memorial Park on Chestnut Street in Portsmouth.

Master woodworker Jeffrey Cooper has been given a most meaningful task by Portsmouth's African Burying Ground Committee.

In his shop on McDonough Street, he has been creating the nine plain

pine caskets that will soon carry the remains of 13 Africans who once walked the streets of the city and who will be interred with great dignity and respect at the African Burying Ground Memorial

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To see a photo gallery and video of master woodworker Jeffrey Cooper's work to create caskets for the Portsmouth African Burying Ground, see Seacoastonline.com.

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BURIAL

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Park next month. They are among some 200 people of African descent who were buried in a field on the outskirts of the city in the 18th and 19th centuries – in what was called the Negro burying ground. Most of the remains were uncovered in 2003 during utility work on Chestnut Street, and have been stored since awaiting reburial.

The longest casket Cooper made is 70 inches by 25 inches, and will contain almost a full sized set of remains. The smallest is 19 inches by 9 inches, with five compartments to hold small pieces of bone found in 2008 that DNA testing has shown to be from five different people.

Two of the caskets fit on top of each other, because when remains were discovered 12 years ago, a 12-year-old child was found buried directly above an adult male. Consulting archaeologist Kathleen Wheeler said the two might well have been related and should be reburied as they were found.

All nine will fit together like puzzle pieces in a large concrete crypt at the burying ground site. When the three largest are placed side by side, the carving on the lids will form a Sankofa – a West African symbol that translates as “reach back and get it.” The symbol will mirror the Sankofa mosaic on a lid that will be placed atop the caskets at the conclusion of the reburial ceremony.

“It will be like a fore-shadow,” said Cooper, “like what’s in the ground and hidden is a reflection of what’s on top.”

And then his handiwork will likely not be seen again. But that’s alright with Cooper, who said it’s been an honor to be part of the African Burying Ground process.

As a few, he said, he is part of a minority, “but because



Master furniture maker Jeffrey Cooper talks about his decision to create a smooth finish on the pine coffins he created, which incorporated hand carving and dovetailed joints along with other details. Cooper was chosen by the city of Portsmouth to build the coffins that will hold the remains of the Africans disinterred at the African Burying Ground that will be placed back in the ground during the ceremony next month. PHOTO BY DEB GRAM/SEACOA STONELINE

All nine [caskets] will fit together like puzzle pieces in a large concrete crypt at the burying ground site. When the three largest are placed side by side, the carving on the lids will form a Sankofa – a West African symbol that translates as “reach back and get it.”



I’m white, I can be a minority or not. It’s my choice. A black person doesn’t have that choice. They walk down the street, and they’re broadcasting who they are,” he said.

He was also drawn by the story of Portsmouth’s slave past. As a 35-year resident of the city, and an active member of Portsmouth Listens, Cooper said he was surprised to learn the breadth of slavery here.

“They came over on ships that came right into Portsmouth, some of them worked on ships, they were owned by Portsmouth families. John Langdon had slaves,” he said, referring to the 18th century New Hampshire governor and U.S. senator from Portsmouth. “Happily, New Hampshire was one of the first states to stop slavery. But here they are.”

Cooper was chosen to

make the caskets by City Councilor Chris Dwyer, an ABG committee member who knew his work. He’s been working out of his McDonough Street shop for 25 years. “I’m planning to die here,” he said, crafting furniture, bas relief carvings and public art during that time.

Many city residents may be most familiar with his work at the Portsmouth Public Library. He carved the hippo, whale and black bear chairs in the children’s room of the library – typical of his style of “connecting with the natural world and bringing it indoors.”

He said he tries not to have an artist’s ego in approaching a commissioned work, instead listening to his clients “and coming up with something that expresses their vision.” This is exactly the process used with city

officials in fashioning the caskets.

“They came to me with their ideas. I wanted to learn what their thought process was and tap into it,” he said. For instance, when he found out the lid over the crypt would contain a Sankofa symbol, he suggested the pattern be repeated on the caskets. “These are all about the people who are being reinterred. They’re all about the park.”

He has kept all the wood shavings from making the caskets, and they will act as a cushion on which to place the remains so they are stable during transit.

The burial service itself was created in consultation with Oscar Moke of the Museum of African Art and Culture in Portland, Maine, and Michael Blakey, who was heavily involved in the African Burial Ground National

African Burying Ground Memorial Park events

Wednesday, May 20

An on-site talk with artist and sculptor Jerome Meadows and Portsmouth Middle School students at 9 a.m. The community is invited to view the ceramic tiles designed by the students installed in the railing at the site and discuss the project with them.

Friday, May 22

African Burying Ground Ancestral Vigil, New Hope Baptist Church, beginning at 7 p.m.

Community members hold an all-night vigil with the remains of the Africans removed from the ground in 2003. The vigil takes place until 7 a.m. the following morning, with services of remembrance at 7 p.m., midnight and 6 a.m. Services include “sending-away” prayers for the departed, music, African drumming, poetry, dance and communal singing. Tradition dictates that at no point during the night are the ancestors to be left alone. Anyone wanting to pay homage to the ancestors overnight is invited to sit quietly. People are also welcomed to say a prayer, recite a poem, sing a song or play an instrument. Those wishing to do so should call JerriAnne Boggis at (603) 318-5120 or email jaboggis@comcast.net, or Kelvin Edwards at (603) 380-0193 or email keledw@comcast.net. Each request should include name, phone number and/or email address, what tribute will be made and time desired for the tribute.

Saturday, May 23

Unveiling of art work at the African Burying Ground, 8:15 a.m.

The Memorial Park, We Stand in Honor of Those Forgotten is a unified public art concept with each piece connected to the memorial’s overall purpose: recognizing the contributions of Africans and African-Americans to Portsmouth and honoring those buried on this site. This is the final preparation of the site prior to the arrival of the remains from New Hope Baptist Church. Community members are invited.

Reburial ceremony at African Burying Ground, 9 a.m.

The ceremony follows the Aug. 17, 2014, Consecration Ceremony held at the site just prior to the start of project construction, which took place the next day. As many as 200 individuals are buried at this site, under the street that is now the Memorial Park. The ceremony includes traditional African burial customs likely familiar to those buried beneath the street.

Public celebration in the Portsmouth Middle School auditorium, 10:30 a.m.

Following the reburial ceremony, a public celebration with food, music and inspirational voices takes place. Full program details, including speakers and musical performances to come.

On site walk-about with project team, noon

After the public celebration, members of the construction team including the project artist and sculptor return to the African Burying Ground to walk the site and answer questions about the memorial installation. All members of the public are invited to speak with the construction team members and reflect on the day’s events.

Monument in New York

City. And so the remains will be wrapped in white cotton, the color of peace, and tied with red ribbons, the color of life. Every coffin nail and bit of wood unearthed with the remains will be reburied with them.

Cooper reflects on the incredible attention to detail paid by the city toward these Africans, and he said he is proud to live here. “This is part of what makes Portsmouth a special place,” he said. “They had the option of putting down a layer of pavement again over these people. But instead they’re honoring them.”