



## African Burying Ground Committee

IN HONDR OF THOSE FORGOTTEN

Ne via Jackenn COURSE FRANCH May 17, 2015

Mary Balley O DESCHARAGERSON Dear Portsmouth Community,

M. Christice Dwyer COUNT \_ HE = RESENTATIVE Since 2003, we have come together to do important work. Not only has our community realized its vision of returning Chestnut Street to sacred ground, we have made a statement to the future about the dignity of all people. We are so proud.

Valerie Conningham

The African Burying Ground Memorial Park – We Stand in Honor of Those Forgotten is complete and the burying place for as many as 200 people of African descent is returned to sacred ground. In October 2003, we were confronted by a part of our history. A conversation followed about black history, white history and our history here on the Seacoast.

Kelvin Lidwards

A Blue Rivana Consulton Apparated by the Mayor of Paramounts In the coming days, our community will mark the completion of The African Burying Ground Memorial Park - We Stand in Honor of Those Forgotten with very special events. On Wednesday artist and sculptor Jerome Meadows will be reunited with the student artists from Portsmouth Middle School on site to view and celebrate their work together. On Friday, at New Hope Baptist Church a powerful Ancestral vigil will be held that is anchored by three services and by many talented people who all desire to pay respects to those men and women being returned to the sacred ground. On Saturday, a powerful reburial ceremony that will include the unveiling of the original works of public art at the site will be held and the remains exhumed from the site will be returned and rejoined with the as many as 200 other souls that lie beneath the site. Later that day, a large public celebration will be held at Portsmouth Middle School, which will be a joyful expression of the conclusion of years of work, soul-searching, fund-raising and passion engaged by everyone involved in realizing the creation of the Portsmouth African Burying Ground. The list is long.

The African Burying Ground Committee has so many people to thank who have stepped forward to participate in this initiative. We thank all of you from the bottom of our hearts for sharing the vision and standing up to make it real. The space that had been a city street is transformed into a quiet place for reflection, memory and a rededication to envisioning our future by knowing our past. The Portsmouth African Burying Ground stands in honor of those forgotten, who are forgotten no more.

Sincerely,

Members of the Mayor's Blue Ribbon Committee on the African Burying Ground

Valerie Cunningham Vernis M. Jackson, Chair Kelvin Edwards Mary J. Bailey, Vice Chair

Public Works Dir. Peter Rice, Ex-Officio M. Christine Dwyer, City Councilor

Deputy City Attorney Suzanne Woodland, Ex-Officio

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Mayor

#### CITY OF PORTSMOUTH

Municipal Complex
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(603) 610-7200
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May 17, 2015

Dear Portsmouth Community,

Nearly twelve years ago, the City of Portsmouth began a journey that has reached its destination.

When fate set us on the path that has led to the creation of the Portsmouth African Burying Ground we did not know where that path would lead.

As Mayor of the City of Portsmouth I am proud to stand with the members of the African Burying Ground Committee and dedicated volunteers, our City Manager and the many Departments involved in this project, the City Council who voted unanimously for it to advance through its many involved in this project, the City Council who voted unanimously for it to advance through its many stages and – most of all – the residents of Portsmouth who said, "This is important. Let's get this project done."

Throughout the community listening sessions, the fund-raising campaign, the unforgettable candlelight processions, stirring concerts and striking African rituals that reminded of us of those who are buried here and their contributions to Portsmouth history, I have been constantly reminded that Portsmouth is a place like no other. We do learn from our past. We do, as the West African Sankofa symbol remind, "Go back and get it."

The Portsmouth African Burying Ground is a historic site. It reflects the history of our ancestors and our nation. It is a solemn City cemetery now re-dedicated to the perpetual rest of those buried here. And it is a permanent landmark along the road of a journey that began much further back than October 2003 and will continue farther than our eyes can see.

Here in Portsmouth, at the African Burying Ground, we stand in honor of those forgotten. As you participate in the events of this week, and in the days and years ahead, thank you for standing by our side.

Yours truly,

Robert J. Lister, Mayor City of Portsmouth



## AFRICAN BURYING GROUND PROJECT TIMELINE

2003 - 2015

|    | - October 2003<br>13 graves revealed under Chestnut Street   |
|----|--|
|    | - August 2004  Portsmouth mayor appoints African Burying Ground Committee  |
|    | - April 2005 City Council votes to accept the Traffic and Safety's Committee's recommendation for a partial street closure.  |
|    | - April 2007<br>City contracts with Roberta Woodburn of<br>Woodburn & Company Landscape Architecture to<br>work on project design  |
|    | <ul> <li>April-May 2007         Committee holds two public forums soliciting input on memorial design.     </li> </ul>   |
|    | - September 2007-June 2008 City conducts national search for outdoor public artist; selects Jerome Meadows of Meadowlark Studios in Savannah, Ga   |
|    | - October 2008<br>Committee presents final design concept to City<br>Council; receives approval.   |
|    | - November 2008 City and project archaeologist and state archaeologist conduct test trenching. Additional remains uncovered at depths in conflict with planned memorial components. Project design adjustment follows. |
|    | - January 2009<br>Committee begins fundraising with volunteer<br>community fundraising team taking the lead.   |
| 1  | - September-December 2010 City Council votes to create the African Burying Ground Trust and votes unanimously to provide \$100,000 toward the project's construction.  |
|    | February 2012 Soweto Gospel Choir fundraiser held at The Music Hall followed by a candlelight procession to the future home of the Memorial Park   |
| X. | - June 2012<br>City works with project abutters to install<br>temporary interpretative signage at the site.  |
|    |  |

April 2012 African Burying Ground Committee honorary co-chair Henry Louis Gates Jr. speaks on behalf of the project at The Loft. June 2012 The City Council again votes to appropriate funding for the project through the Capital Improvement Program, bringing the total City contribution to \$250,000. February 2013 Playwright Carlyle Brown performs "FULA from America" at a fundraiser at The Music Hall, followed by a candlelight procession to the site with a performance by Con Tutti, Voices from the Heart. April 2013 City of Portsmouth receives \$20,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts June 2013 NH Legislature responds to 1779 petition of enslaved Portsmouth Africans and passes legislation to free them posthumously. Gov. Maggie Hassan signs legislation in Portsmouth ceremony. November 2013 Performance of original play created by Sarah Vedrani for the Moffatt-Ladd House & Garden, "A Chance for Freedom" February 2014 City issues Request for Qualifications for memorial construction. April 2014 African Burying Ground Committee honorary co-chair Laurel Thatcher Ulrich speaks on behalf of the project at South Church June 2014 City awards construction contract to Piscataqua Landscaping of Eliot, Maine August 2014 Consecration of the African Burying Ground site takes place and construction begins the next day. January 2015 African Burying Ground Committee works with wood artist Jeffrey Cooper to construct caskets for reburial on site. March 2015 City announces final construction schedule,

reburial ceremony, and community celebration

on May 23.

#### Souls finally get voice at African Burying Ground

#### By Deborah McDermott

A version of this story was first published on August 17, 2014

PORTSMOUTH — In West African cultures, there is a tradition called "paying libation." It is a ritual of giving homage to the ancestors, to thank them for their time on earth and to seek their guidance and protection in future endeavors.

At its heart, the African Burying Ground Memorial Park has always been about paying libation, say those who have been involved for more than a decade in its creation.

"It's unique and immensely satisfying, the degree to which Portsmouth has come to understand the sacredness of the site," said sculptor Jerome Meadows, of Savannah, Ga., who designed the park. "They have risen to their higher nature and paid respect to those who in the past have been ill-treated."

It is a park that has sparked the attention of archaeologists, historians and African diaspora experts from around the county, and for a good reason.. The African Burying Ground on

Chestnut Street and the African Burial Ground in New York City are the only authenticated northern United States sites where forensic analysis confirms the presence of Africans dating back to the Colonial era.

"Other African burying grounds date to the 19th century, but not the 18th century," said Kathleen Wheeler of Independent Archaeological Consulting, the consulting archaeologist on the project.

The Chestnut Street area of the city was identified as early as 1705 as the city's Negro Burying Yard. A report Wheeler wrote for the city indicates that by the 1790s the burying ground was "subsumed into the urban landscape as part of Chestnut Street."

Historians Valerie Cunningham and Mark Sammons, in their book "Black Portsmouth," write that the Negro Burying Yard occupied the west side of Chestnut Street between State and Court streets. It is believed that as many as 200

Africans could be buried there.

Wheeler said it is likely that seaports up and down the East Coast, to which enslaved people were brought from West Africa, had similar burying grounds. Most, like Portsmouth's, were — and likely still are — buried under buildings and roads as cities pushed out beyond their downtowns.

"There's so many questions we can't really answer. Who are they? What are their names?" she said. "Did they come directly from Africa, or did they come through the West Indies? It causes us to have to create new questions to find answers that aren't readily available."

As "Black Portsmouth" chronicles, several Portsmouth investors outfitted vessels that engaged in the slave trade and Portsmouth was on the edge of the major East Coast slave trade

By 1767, according the census records, 187

blacks lived in Portsmouth, 4.1 percent of the city's 4,446 residents. Not all were necessarily enslaved. Wheeler's report indicates free blacks lived in the city as early as 1731. As the years went by, the number of blacks grew smaller and in 1789 slavery was outlawed in New Hampshire.

The last interment of an African was about 1800, Wheeler said in her report.



Portsmouth's African Burying Ground Memorial Park on Chestnut Street is nearing the end of construction. Photo by Deb Cram/Seacoastonline



#### Moffatt-Ladd House & Garden

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Honoring the memory of those who lie in the African Burying Ground and the many enslaved men and women of Portsmouth, especially those who lived in the Moffatt-Ladd House, including two signers of the 1779 Petition of Freedom: Prince Whipple and Windsor Moffatt.



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"If there is no struggle, there is no progress..."

-- Frederick Douglass



In remembrance of those who passed before us.



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#### Jerome Meadows discusses vision for African Burying Ground Memorial

#### By Deborah McDermott

This article was first published in the Herald May 22, 2011

PORTSMOUTH — For most of his life, Jerome Meadows has been working to ensure that art mirrors life in all its struggles, imperfections and joys. He sees art as not separate, not "elite, and not meant only for the elite" but something that can be understood by and have relevance for everyone.

It is a sensibility formed by his Bronx, N.Y., childhood, honed over years of academic achievement, political struggle and mature reflection, and that will soon find its expression in the African Burying Ground Memorial Park here in Portsmouth.

Meadows, who lives and runs a community art gallery in Savannah, Ga., was selected by the African Burying Ground Committee to design the memorial park, which will be built atop the burial ground on Chestnut Street. Meadows' dream for the site was to create something respectful of the African slaves buried there and a testament to the sense of community in the city.

And everything in his background as a sculptor, an African American and a community builder indicates why the committee felt he was the right person for the job. Meadows said he can trace his first inklings as an artist to when he was a boy living in a sixth-floor tenement in

"My strongest recollection is sitting at the dining room table drawing horses," he said. "Now, I don't have to tell you, there were no horses in the Bronx. I'd never seen a horse. But it was enjoyable, safe and satisfying to go into that imaginary world afforded an artist."

He said those horses stayed with him as a "metaphor for freedom" throughout his school years and into college, where he was selected to attend the Rhode Island School of Design, which in the 1970s wanted to increase its minority student population.

"It went from 1 to 10 percent of the student population overnight, so there was some adjustment on campus," he said. "That's where race and art started to come together for me. How can art be more relevant to society? I struggled with that in my work. Although I was politically active as a person, I wanted my

For 20 years after college, Meadows taught at art institutes and colleges, for the last four years as assistant professor of art at Howard University. "I had a wife and child. I had to be practical, and teaching was a nice middle ground," he said.

But he found himself begrudging his time teaching classes because it was taking him away from his studio. "Meanwhile, I had friends who were working at the post office five days a week and saying, 'You're complaining about this?' But I learned at RISD that being an artist is valuable in and of itself."

His first public installations started early in his teaching career, a public arts project in Albany, N.Y. As years went on, he found himself drawn further down that path. "I was keen on exploring sizes, materials and sociological approaches to culture," he said. "And I was smitten with the idea that someone would give me money to do something large and place it in a community. I wanted to do more and more

Among his major public sculptures are the Martin Luther King Living Memorial in Anchorage, Alaska; Truths that Rise from the Roots Remembered in Alexandria, Va.; To Create the Beloved Community in Albuquerque, N.M.; and Carry the Rainbow on Your Shoulders in Unity Park in Washington,

He said that although he is African American and many of his major works are concerned with his race's identity, he does not view them primarily through that lens. "The common theme among them all is community. And in most cases, those neighborhoods were predominantly African American," he said. "But the question of how art can serve society overwhelms any personal politics. And that question then becomes less didactic and more about universal values."

Public art, he said, "is the antithesis of an elitist, ivory-tower approach. Not only that, it represents things a community wants to

artwork to symbolize the movement of those That's certainly the sense he got when he applied for and received the commission to design the African Burying Ground in Portsmouth, he said.

> Since the first bodies of African slaves were discovered on Chestnut Street in 2003, the city has been involved in finding a way to commemorate the spot. Meadows was faced with a site that was challenging in many ways. The street itself could not be blocked to residents who live and work there, it was on a slope and the committee had already chosen landscape architect Roberta Woodburn, of Newmarket, who had been working on plans.

> "How do you transform this through street into something that's respectful of the cemetery that is there?" he asked. "It wasn't an option that it could be blocked, so how do you

> Then, he said, he had to consider the pedestrian walking through the site, which sits between State and Court streets. "I'm always mindful of them. Where are they? What should they

The entry piece is a granite wall. featuring two life-sized bronze casts, one of a man representing a Portsmouth slave and one of a woman representing Mother Africa. Their arms reach out around the side of the wall, where their hands almost, but do not, touch.

"I toyed with that idea for weeks. Should I put one hand over the other, or one just around the corner of the wall?" He asked the committee, and its unanimous sense was that the hands should nearly touch. "The first African is being removed from Mother Africa, but here we are centuries later and they're finally reconnecting. It hasn't been accomplished yet, but there's a sense that it will be."

That sense of detail continues throughout the memorial, right down to the tiles that will be installed in the railings that will be designed by Portsmouth schoolchildren.

"It will provide them with an opportunity to learn about the history of African Americans in their city and inform them about the history



Jerome Meadows of Savannah, GA., sculptor of the African Burying Ground Memorial, stands with Vernis Jackson, founder of the Seacoast African American Cultural Center and burying ground committee chair, while at Portsmouth Middle School, working with students and helping them to make tiles that will be in the new memorial.

Photo by Rich Beauchesne/Seacoastonline

## African Burying Ground sculptor guides Middle School student art contributions

By Jesse Scardina

This article first appeared in the Herald on Oct. 23, 2014

PORTSMOUTH - Eighth-grader Becca Ingwersen spent Thursday morning making her permanent mark on the culture of the city.

So did classmates Grace Goddard, Ratana Ryan and Tariq Abdelsadek and 84 other eighth-graders, as they worked meticulously on designing tiles that will help decorate the memorial the African Burying Ground, unearthed in downtown Portsmouth in 2003.

The decade-plus, \$1.2 million project is nearing completion, with a spring 2015 date of a reburial ceremony. The public art memorial, designed by Savannah, Ga.-based artist Jerome Meadows will be installed. Meadows, who was at Portsmouth Middle School Thursday watching the students design the tiles using Ghanaian-based art, which included Adinkra symbols and Kente patterns, saw an opportunity in his design to include art developed by the community.

"It was a way of giving the younger generation a stake in the project," Meadows said.

The eighth-graders were making designs that would be laminated and fired onto a tile by Meadows. The interpretation was left up to the students, Meadows said, but there was some guidance. "It's about using the symbol and colors as a language," he said. "Think about what the Adinkra symbol means and use colors to complement that. You don't want them to be competing."

It was up to the students to decide whether to include an Adinkra symbol, like Ratana Ryan did with the fawohodie symbol, which means independence, or to work with a Kente pattern, with each color having its own meaning, like Becca Ingwersen's tile.

"I liked the idea of bringing together all the Earth colors," Ingwersen said, pointing to purple and blue, which stand for the Earth and sky, respectively.

Anna Nuttell, one of Portsmouth Middle School's art

teachers, said the project has been an educational, thought-provoking and enlightening experience for the students — especially with the added benefit of having Meadows speak with them.

"His first class with them it almost brought tears to my eyes," Nuttell said. "He talked about the power of art and what public art is, and one student said 'Public art is like public speaking,' and another said 'Yes, except it's always

The discovery of the burial ground has been implemented into different parts of the curriculum, as art teachers discuss public art and African-inspired art, while science teachers look at the geology of the location off Court and State streets, and social studies teachers discuss the heritage and history of Africa and its diverse countries.

"The students are the ones that will be carrying on this community," said Vernis Jackson, chair of the Committee on the African Burying Ground. "After spending so much time raising money for this project, to see it coming to fruition, to see this and the kids and how involved they are in this, it almost brings you to

Once the students finish designing and making their tiles, the colorful and poignant designs will be shipped to Meadows in Savannah, where he will digitally upload each one — so that if anything were to happen to any tiles, the artwork would be available - before using a special technique that will allow the image to be laminated onto a ceramic tile, which will be fired in a kiln that will impose the artwork onto the tile.

The pattern of the 112 tiles will be decided by Meadows, who is hoping to pair up an Adinkra tile with a Kente counterpart. The tiles will be placed along the back railing of the memorial park and are expected to be unveiled this month.

I stand for the Ancestors Here and Beyond I stand for those who feel anger *I stand for those who were treated unjustly* I stand for those who were taken from their loved ones I stand for those who suffered the middle passage I stand for those who survived upon these shores I stand for those who pay homage to this ground I stand for those who find dignity in these bones

-- Jerome Meadows, artist and sculptor

#### STANDING IN HONOR OF THOSE FORGOTTEN Better to light a single candle than curse the darkness.

Strawbery Banke Museum stands remembering those whose lives intersected at four sites on the Portsmouth Black Heritage Trail on Puddle Dock:

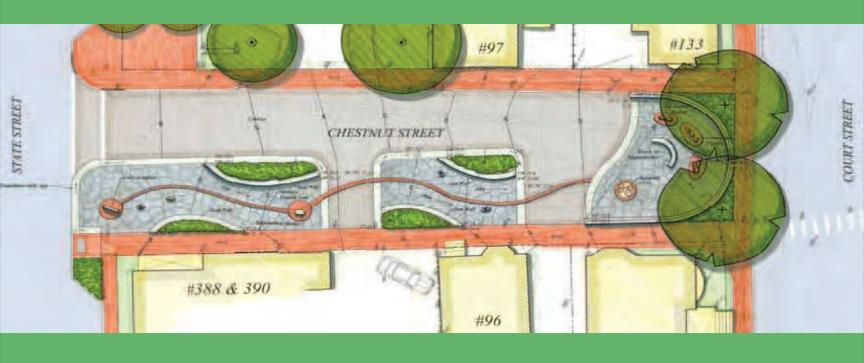
The tavern of James Stoodley who auctioned and owned unnamed enslaved persons. Pitt Tavern and those enslaved by John Stavers, including James who held off a rioting mob in January 1779, Frank and Flora who married Silas Bruce. The house of James Sherburne who owned an unnamed enslaved African man and woman who lived in the attic. The office of Judge Samuel Penhallow who signed the manumission papers of Newport

(Stiles) Freeman and many others.

14 Hancock St., Portsmouth NH 03801 603.433.1100 strawberybanke.org



Honoring the African Burial ground Effort.



## Making Plans a Reality.

We applaud the tremendous community effort that has gone into making the new Portsmouth African Burying Ground Memorial Park a reality. It's been an honor and a privilege to play our part in ensuring that this unique piece of Portsmouth history is memorialized. Now, it's a place where all of us can go to pay tribute and come together as a vibrant, unified community. Thank you, Portsmouth!



26 Maclellan Lane · Eliot, Maine 03903 207.439.2241 · piscataqualandscaping.com

Photo Credit: David J. Murray, ClearEyePhoto.com

On June 7, 2013, Gov. Maggie Hassan came to the Discover Portsmouth Center to sign into law a bill posthumously freeing 14 city slaves. In 1779, the slaves had petitioned the General Assembly, the precursor to the NH Legislature, for their freedom. More than 200 years later, state Sen. Martha Fuller Clark, D-Portsmouth, filed a bill that passed both houses unanimously before it was signed by Hassan. Hassan said the legislation righted a "centuries overdue wrong."



Photo Credit: Deb Cram

#### Portsmouth slaves sought freedom in 1779 petition

#### By Deborah McDermott

This story was first published on Oct. 3, 2011

PORTSMOUTH — During Revolutionary War era, it was not just white men in Philadelphia who wrote stirring words of freedom from tyranny.

Three years after the Declaration of Independence was penned, in what historians now see as an ironic twist, 20 Portsmouth slaves — including one owned by a Declaration signer — submitted their own petition for freedom. While it was ultimately unsuccessful - it died in the N.H. General Assembly (the precursor to the Legislature), which then met in Exeter - the petition penned in November 1779 marks a significant moment in the city's black history.

"It asserts that they were born Africans and free, and shows a consciousness of being free Americans," said David Watters, a professor of English at the University of New Hampshire and a board member of the Portsmouth Black Heritage Trail.

A lengthy, literate and emotional document, the petition was very much in the mold of the Declaration, written at a time when the oral and written buzz throughout the colonies was replete with notions of justice, fairness and liberty for all.

It ultimately asks legislators to "enact such laws and regulations as in your wisdom think proper, whereby we may regain our liberty and be ranked in the class of free agents and that the name of slave may not more be heard in a land gloriously contending for the sweets of freedom."

The signers were slaves owned by a who's who of Portsmouth's elite, names that ring through the centuries to today — Gardner, Warner, Brewster, Gerrish, Odiorne.

One, Prince Whipple, was owned by William Whipple, a New Hampshire representative to the Continental Congress and a Declaration of Independence signer.

Many of these slaves were important in the community in their own right. As detailed in "Black Portsmouth," written by Valerie Cunningham and Mark Sammons, they

were members of the "Negro Court."

The Negro Court was in essence a black government that existed side by side with the white government in Portsmouth — as well as in other cities across the Northeast.

The court was chosen by slave members of the Portsmouth community. According to Robert Dishman, a retired Dartmouth College professor who wrote about the petition in a publication of the New Hampshire Historical Society, the "social rank and influence of slaves tended to follow that of the master."

Each June, following elections, they would gather for a procession.

"Arrayed in brilliant clothes, the region's black population assembled, then processed out of the city center to the outskirts and returned some hours later with festive music and boisterous gunfire to a grand celebration of their newly elected monarch and court," Cunningham and Sammons

The court was led by a king - likely a nod to the royalty of tribes in Africa. In the period when the petition was written, the court consisted of "King" Nero Brewster, owned by Col. William Brewster; Viceroy Willie Clarkson, owned by Peirse Clarkson; Sheriff Jock Odiorne and Deputy Pharaoh

Cunningham and Sammons said the court was "held in high regard" by the slave community and it meted out justice for minor crimes. They mention an incident in which a slave was charged with stealing an axe, was found guilty by the court, and was sentenced to 20 lashes — the punishment dealt in public by Willie Clarkson.

"It was a way within slavery to maintain social order and a sense of community," Watters said. "They replicated the white hierarchy and power structure, and it is obvious that there was at least some cooperation and perhaps even some status within white families of having a slave on

But Watters said it's also the case that slaves, legislative action on it.

as property, likely couldn't be found guilty and punished in the white judicial system because they weren't free.

It is not known who actually wrote the petition. Dishman, in his article in "Historical New Hampshire," makes the case that it was likely written by Jonathan Mitchell Sewall, an attorney and abolitionist who had recently moved to the Portsmouth

Cunningham and Sammons said there is no reason to believe the author was not black, and point to African-born Boston poet Phyllis Wheatley as proof that blacks of the era had mastered the English language sufficiently to have written the petition.

Watters can see both points of view. "No doubt there were sympathetic whites who would agreed with this move toward freedom," he said. "But I would not rule out the possibility that this is a black-authored

He said the Revolutionary War years were incredibly rich in both oral and written treatises on freedom, and blacks as well as whites were caught up in the fervor of the

The language in the petition was "well known. There were similar petitions in other cities. Newspapers were around. And don't forget the oral culture. This was a time when John and Sam Adams were giving speeches," he said.

The petition was not brought before the New Hampshire General Assembly until April 1780. At that time, members ordered it to be published in the New Hampshire Gazette "that any person or persons may then appear and shew (sic) cause why the prayer thereof may not be granted."

The following summer, when it was published in the newspaper, there was "an editorial disclaimer that it was printed 'for the amusement' of its readers," Cunningham and Sammons wrote.

The House postponed a hearing on the petition, and there was never any other

## Thank you

The Members of the Mayor's Blue Ribbon Committee on the African Burying Ground would like to acknowledge and thank the following:

#### **Fundraising volunteers**

Honorary Co-Chair Dr. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich
Honorary Co-Chair Dr. Henry Louis Gates, Jr.
Vernis Jackson
Susan Carlisle
George Carlisle
Tracey Clarkson
M. Christine Dwyer
Morey Goodman
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#### Design & construction team that made We Stand in Honor of Those Forgotten into reality.

Jerome B. Meadows – Meadowlark Studios
Roberta Woodburn – Woodburn & Company
Landscape Architecture
Piscataqua Landscaping & Tree Service
Full Circle Stone Works
CMA Engineers, Inc.
Independent Archaeological Consulting
Jeffrey Cooper Wood Sculptor
Portsmouth Middle School Art Students and
Art Department
State Archaeologist Richard Boisvert

#### Special events visioning and planning

TD Bank, through the TD Charitable Foundation J. Verne Wood Funeral Home Farrell Funeral Home Charmingfare Farm
New Hope Baptist Church
Men and women of the City of Portsmouth
School, Public Works, Police, Fire and Municipal
Departments

Seacoast African American Cultural Center State Street Church

JerriAnne Boggis
Portsmouth Historical

Portsmouth Historical Society Portsmouth Black Heritage Trail

Jeffrey Cooper, Wood Sculptor Brown & Company

Seacoast Media Group Independent Archaeological Consulting LLC

Portsmouth Middle School Portsmouth Middle School Art Department

Infinite Imaging Peter Lamb

Anna Nuttal, Visual Arts Teacher Chief Oscar Mokeme

David J. Murray, ClearEyePhoto.com John Benford, John Benford Photography

Nevin Brown, Photographer Roger Goun Photography

Richard Haynes, Photographer Crystal Paradis, Photographer

Peter AC Newbury, Photographer
Atlantic Media Productions - Nancy and Brian

Vawter

Phineas graphic design + printing solutions Lynne Crocker, Fine Repair & Restoration Bookbinding

Popovers on the Square Grill 28

Portsmouth Music and Arts Center St. John's Church Youth Group

Portwalk Partners

#### Non-profit partners and local area businesses

Seacoast African American Cultural Center Portsmouth Historical Society Portsmouth Black

Heritage Trail Winter Holben Design

3S Artspace Senator Martha Fuller Clark

Thomas R. Watson Martingale Wharf

The Music Hall An American Treasure for the Arts

Altus Engineering
African Burying Ground project abutters

Megan Stelzer Design Popovers on the Square

TD Bank

Portwalk Partners

Art-Speak, City of Portsmouth Cultural Commission The Teachers at Portsmouth High School and Portsmouth Middle School

#### **Schedule of Public Events**

#### Wednesday, May 20

On-site event, sculptor Jerome Meadows, Portsmouth Middle School Students -- 9 a.m.

Portsmouth Middle School students who worked with Meadows during a school outreach project in October 2014 join him at the Memorial Park on Chestnut Street to reveal the ceramic tiles they designed, which will be installed in the decorative railing. This event coincides with a middle school art show of student works about the African Burying Ground at the Seacoast African American Cultural Center gallery, 10 Middle St.

#### Thursday, May 21

Community forum on public art, 3S Artspace, 319 Vaughan St. -- 6:30 p.m.

Jerome Meadows will speak on the importance of public art; sponsored by Art-Speak and 3S Artspace, Free and open to the public

#### Friday, May 22

African Burying Ground Ancestral Vigil, New Hope Baptist Church -- starting 7 p.m.

As part of the reburial celebration, an all-night vigil will be held at the New Hope Baptist Church, 263 Peverly Hill Road, Portsmouth. The caskets containing the remains of the 13 Africans to be reburied will be at the church from 7 p.m. Friday until 7 a.m. Saturday. Services of remembrance take place at 7 p.m. Friday, 12 midnight and 6 a.m. Saturday. The hours between services are open to pay homage to the ancestors. This could mean reciting a poem, saying a prayer, singing a song or playing an instrument. To participate, contact JerriAnne Boggis (jaboggis@comcast.net). Each request should include name, phone number and/or email address, what tribute will be made and time.



#### Saturday, May 23

Reburial Ceremony at African Burying
t Ground -- 8:30 a.m.

The reburial ceremony follows the Aug. 17, 2014 Consecration Ceremony held at the site just prior to the commencement of project construction. The ceremony includes traditional African burial customs likely familiar to those being buried beneath the street as well as the unveiling of the art works by project artist and sculptor Jerome Meadows.

Public Celebration at Portsmouth Middle School Auditorium -- 10:30 a.m.

Following the reburial ceremony, a public celebration with food, music, and inspirational voices takes place at the Portsmouth Middle School Auditorium.

On site walk-about with project artist and construction team -- 1:30 p.m.

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.

#### Burial Vault Lid Placement

At the close of the day, the burial vault lid will be placed on the vault. Members of the public will be invited to witness from a safe distance.

Concert, Blind Boys of Alabama, The Music Hall -- 7 p.m.

For tickets, visit www.themusichall.org.

For complete, up-to-the-minute information, please visit www.africanburyinggroundnh.org

Chief Oscar Mokeme wearing a West African mask during the consecration ceremony in August, 2014.

## What you are seeing at the Memorial Park

The Entry Figures (State Street end) -- The male figure stands for the first enslaved Africans brought to Portsmouth and those who followed. The female figure represents Mother Africa, endlessly straining past the obstacles that keep her from her children of the Diaspora. Together, as each figure reaches around the edge of the granite slab towards the other, they physically embody the separation and uncertainty experienced by those brought here as captives as well as their perseverance. The gap between their fingertips is a reminder of their forced separation and of the divisions of past injustice.

The Petition Line -- In 1779, twenty men who had been forcibly brought from West — Africa when they were children and were purchased by prominent local families, petitioned the New Hampshire legislature for their freedom and for an end to slavery in the state. Quoting phrases from this "Petition for Freedom," the petition line of red granite is a visual and historical thread linking the elements of the memorial and putting eloquent voice to those so long forgotten and ignored. Extending from the entry figures through a space of contemplation, the line disappears into the burial vault beneath the plaza. The West African symbol adorning this line is "Nsoromma" that means "Child of the Heavens" and is an icon of guardianship.

Burial Vault Lid -- The Adinkra figure "Sankofa" meaning "Return and Get It -- Learn from the Past" forms a shield and cover for the burial vault containing the re-interred remains of those exhumed in 2003 and additional partial remains found at the site during preparations for the memorial.

Decorative Railing -- The design is based on an African kente cloth motif suggestive of boat paddles. The ceramic tiles embedded in the railing were created by students from Portsmouth Public Schools. By forming the tiles, these schoolchildren link hands with past children who worked here and future generations who will stop, remember and stand for those forgotten.

Community Figures (Court Street end)-- These life-sized bronze silhouettes represent the collective community of greater Portsmouth, gathered with resolve to acknowledge, protect and pay homage to the souls whose remains were uncovered in 2003. Each figure bears a line from the poem by memorial sculptor Jerome Meadows, inspired by this sacred place.





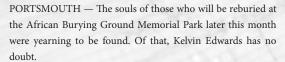


## 'I'm here. Don't forget me.'

#### City's African ancestors to be honored and revered

#### By Deborah McDermott

This story appeared in the Portsmouth Herald on May 3, 2015.



"After being forgotten for such a long time, the souls were saying, 'I'm here. Don't forget me, please," said Edwards, president of the Seacoast African American Cultural Center. "I lived here. I worked here and I feel I should have more than the covering of concrete for my existence."

Edwards is joining many in the Seacoast's descendant community in creating ritual and ceremony to honor the remains of 13 Africans who will be reburied with great dignity at the memorial park on Chestnut Street May 23. Few details have been left to chance, all facets are intended to bring closure to those who were buried and forgotten in the city's Negro Burying Ground hundreds of years ago.

"We're creating a ceremony that is authentic. Even though we don't know what culture these people are from, they are sons and daughters of the soil," said Oscar Mokeme of the Museum of African Art and Culture in Portland, a Nigerian chief who has been consulting with the burying ground committee and will lead the May 23 ceremony. "We say to them, 'May you go in peace to the land of your ancestors. We don't know why you chose to make yourself known, but you revealed yourself. We respect your wishes and have created a monument where you



Kel Edwards and Valerie Cunningham sit at the New Hope Baptist Church where an overnight vigil will take place May 22. Caskets containing the remains of 13 Africans will be at the church throughout the ritual. Among the city's earliest African-American residents, both free and slave, they were discovered during infrastructure improvement work on Chestnut Street in October 2003.

Photo by Deb Cram/Seacoastonline

can rest in peace and where we can continue to celebrate your life."

The public events to honor the reburial of the Africans will begin Friday evening, May 22, with a night-long ancestral vigil at New Hope Baptist Church in Portsmouth, followed by a reburial ceremony at the site of the memorial park on May 23.

But arrangements for the reburial will actually begin several days before the ceremony, when 20 women elders from the Seacoast area will gather to prepare the remains. Mokeme said this is traditional in many West African countries, and in fact Edwards, who grew up in the South, remembers a similar tradition among his African American friends and family.

The remains, which have been in storage since they were first removed following routine utility work conducted by the city in 2003, will be prepared in a most symbolic and thoughtful way.

First, the caskets made by Portsmouth woodworker Jeff Cooper will be lined with shavings. In multi-layered symmetry, most of the shavings come from the early 18th Century timbers used to build the Kittery Point house that in the 20th century became Rock Rest — an African American guest house owned by Hazel and Clayton Sinclair.

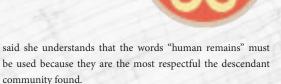
When the timbers were removed by the current owner during reconstruction, Kittery Point resident Peter Lamb asked if he could have them and built a timberframe workshop. What he didn't use he is hand-planing into shavings for the caskets.

"The symbolism is two-fold: it's physically connected to the spirit of what Rock Rest represented, and the timbers were trees that grew in this world around the same time the African Burying Ground was being used," Lamb said. "It's not impossible that they could have been hewed by indentured servants or enslaved people."

For Lamb himself, who traces both sides of his family tree to 17th century America, "it is probable that some branch of my own family owned slaves. So as I'm planing these timbers, I'm working on my own stories."

After the caskets are lined, the women will prepare the remains using white linen — white for peace, "so we put them back into the earth with peace," said Mokeme. And they will tie the shrouds in red ribbon, which Mokeme said signifies "life and love, the symbol of mystery. We represent them in the land of the living while they represent us in the land of the dead."

Valerie Cunningham, the founder of the Portsmouth Black Heritage Trail and co-author of "Black Portsmouth," will be one of the women elders preparing the remains. She



"But they're very sterile words," she said. "So when we step back from that sterilized language, I am approaching them as people. It doesn't matter whether a full anatomical skeleton is there. It's a person who will be there and who we will be interacting with."

She said as each woman elder was invited to participate in the preparation, "we could hear in their voices that they were almost overcome by the sense of responsibility and honor and reverence they were going to bring with them."

The prepared caskets will be taken by hearse and kept at J. Verne Wood Funeral Home until Friday evening, when they will be brought to New Hope Baptist Church. Edwards and JerriAnne Boggis, director of the Portsmouth Black Heritage Trail, have put together what they hope will be a moving overnight vigil.

"Traditionally, relatives of the person who passed away would stand watch overnight all night long to help them pass on," said Boggis.

Services will be held at 7 p.m. – to honor and revere them; at midnight – to celebrate their lives; and at 6 a.m. – to send them on their way. Throughout the night, people are invited to sing, read a poem, play an instrument, or simply sit in silence.

On Saturday morning, the caskets will be taken by Farrell Funeral Home to a staging area, where they will be placed on horse-drawn caissons. The pallbearers, Mokeme, and memorial park creator Jerome Meadows will be among those who will walk behind the caissons to the park for the reburial ceremony, which begins at 8:30 a.m.

The caskets will be placed into a crypt – feet to the east, head to the west, as they were found, said Kathleen Wheeler of Independent Archaeological Consulting, the archaeologist who has been involved in the project since 2003. "It's an old Judeo-Christian tradition, so that when the messiah comes, you face Jerusalem. But I think they (the slave community) had their own subtle ways of resistance. The feet point to the east because that might be that's where our ancestors are – in Africa."

The ceremony crafted by Mokeme will use elements of earth – sand, for the beaches here and in Africa; dust, to remind us that we return to dust; and white clay, "a symbol of deep gratitude and peace," he said.

"It will be a celebration of gratitude that these spirits made themselves known to us, and to remind the children not yet born that the spirits of the ancestors are here," he said.

#### Rising to the occasion for the African Burying Ground

#### By Deborah McDermott

This article was first published April 26, 2015

PORTSMOUTH – It may have taken more than 250 years to honor the city's African forebears, but donors to the African Burying Ground Memorial Park say it is proof that a committed city and its citizenry cannot only learn from a dark chapter in history but embrace its lessons.

There is still money left to raise toward the \$1.2 million cost of the park. Contributions have ranged from \$5 from a 7-year-old to individuals and Portsmouth companies contributing tens of thousands of dollars.

"This is a classic instance where the public and private sector have taken on a task and have really risen to the occasion," said Michael Kane, CEO of The Kane Co., who recently made a personal contribution to the park. "There's been a tremendous amount of satisfaction in being involved. The satisfaction comes not only from supporting the African Burying Ground, but also the community's diversity and cultural makeup. One builds on the other."

The African Burying Ground Memorial Park on Chestnut Street will honor 200-some people of African descent who are believed to be buried underneath what is now the area west of Chestnut Street between State and Court streets.

The city of Portsmouth took the lead in deciding to build the park, to recognize rather than ignore the burying ground after remains were discovered in 2003. And to this day, it is the largest donor – contributing \$250,000 in federal urban development grant funding.

"Frankly, I think the people who run the city of Portsmouth are doing an amazing job and this is one example," Kane said. "The more this kind of thing happens, the better the community gets. A rising tide lifts all boats."

"I'm not sure you can get a more important project than this one," said Steven Webb, market president of TD Bank in New Hampshire, which has given a total of \$30,000 to the project. And the city, he said, recognized that. "The city has done a great job."

"It says a lot about a community – to close a city street, and create a public park for people to enjoy for generations to come. Fifty to 100 years from now, people are going to be talking about the citizens of 2015 and the choices that they made," said Shari Young, chief operating officer of LodgeSys Management, which manages the Sheraton Harborside Hotel. Together with HarborCorp, the hotel donated \$20,000 just recently to the park.

City Councilor Chris Dwyer, a member of the African

Burying Ground Committee, has donated to the project several times with her husband, Mike Huxtable. She said when the council speaks as one voice, as it did with the burying ground, the results are significant.

"When the council is willing to give leadership on an issue, the city staff always steps up 100 percent," she said. "It is rare to have some common agreement on moving forward together. In the unanimity, there is a great sense of accomplishment."

In taking the lead, said donors, the city in essence gave permission for residents to explore the history of Portsmouth's slave holding past and come to terms with what its legacy means for people today.

"In New England, there may have been a tendency not to acknowledge we had slaves here," said state Sen. Martha Fuller Clark, D-Portsmouth, who along with her husband, Geoffrey, has made several donations to the park. "By first of all showing extraordinary respect for how the graves were handled, and now building the park, we have been invited to become very comfortable in talking about this part of our history and seeing it as important."

Clark introduced legislation signed into law in 2013 that posthumously freed 14 city slaves who petitioned the state for their freedom in 1779. The slaves based their petition on the Declaration of Independence. "The petition was so eloquent, so intelligent, written by those simply asking to be recognized as people like the rest of us," she said. "Even 200 years later, recognizing the power of that, and all that it symbolizes, was very rewarding."

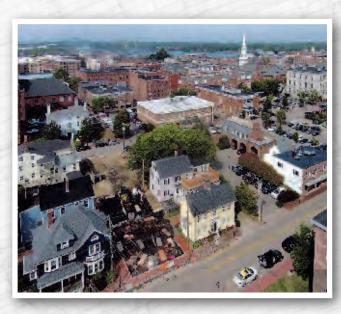
The burying ground has to be put into the context of a slave community that helped build Portsmouth and make it prosper, Webb said. "This is an incredibly important archaeological project, not just for Portsmouth but for the entire region," he said. "Many people didn't realize that slaves were a part of the city's early development and they played a big part in its growth."

Jim Jalbert of C&J Trailways, whose company recently donated \$5,000 to the park, agrees. "The horrible idea that slavery was used to build this country – you cannot minimize the importance of that," he said. There is still work to do, he said. "Diversity in our community, while improving, continues to be a challenge."

Donors said they would hope anyone, from those of modest means to people who can afford significant donations, will consider helping the burying ground committee reach its goals.

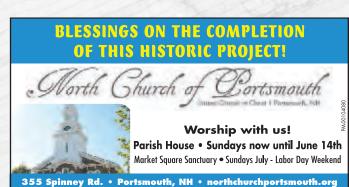
"Every gift represents a commitment to telling the

complex story that the burying ground represents," Dwyer said. "Once people grasp the importance and the magnitude of the project, they want to know more about the history and become converted to the cause."



This aerial photograph shows the African Burying Ground Memorial Park on Chestnut Street. Some \$1.2 million has been raised to construct the park, with contributions as small as \$5 to as large as \$90,000. The City of Portsmouth designated \$250,000 in federal grant funds to the project.

Photo Credit: David J. Murray, ClearEyePhoto.com



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## Sold!

# Portsmouth did brisk business in human lives

By Adam Leech

This story first appeared in The Portsmouth Herald on July 8, 2007.



Photo Credit: David J. Murray, ClearEyePhoto.com

They never saw their parents, family or homeland after the age of 8. They were captured in the middle of the night by fellow countrymen raiding small villages. They were chained in coffles, and if they survived beatings and dehydration during the trip to a port, they were stored with thousands of others in barracoons, awaiting a treacherous transatlantic voyage to an unknown world.

"They" are the nameless humans whose remains lie underneath downtown Portsmouth in an estimated 200 unmarked graves in the area of Chestnut Street. They are proof of a dark period in the city's history — one that, whether by disillusion, misinformation or ignorance, is often forgotten.

As they were in most other New England cities, slaves from Africa and the West Indies were an integral part of life in Portsmouth in the 18th century. At its peak, in 1767, there were 187 African slaves in Portsmouth. At that time, the city accounted for 30 percent of the state's African slave population, but only 8 percent of the total state population.

Their journey to Portsmouth was wrought with disease and death. Many were packed into the low-ceilinged holds of ships with the other captives, where seasickness, dehydration, starvation, rape and malnutrition contributed to deaths and suicides. The dead, and sometimes the living, were tossed overboard.

"I don't think anyone can even begin to imagine what it was like. It's almost incomprehensible. Body odors, seasickness, diarrhea, disease, women menstruating, all in very cramped spaces. They had no idea where they were going or what was happening. For many, it was the first time they saw the ocean. Some of them jumped overboard — they would rather commit suicide than go to this horrible unknown future," said Valerie Cunningham, coauthor of "Black Portsmouth," and head of the Black Heritage Trail.

If they survived, they arrived at the city's Long Wharf where they were sold right off the ship by auction or brought to one of the local inns, such as Stoodley's Tavern on Congress Street, where they were sold. Prospective buyers could poke and prod the captives — which included men and women

of nearly every age group — to gauge their usefulness.

Prices often ranged between 30 and 200 pounds — buying power equivalent to between \$6,000 and \$40,000 today — depending on the individual slave. At the same age, men were worth more than women, though a young woman could go for equal or more than a man over the age of 40. Buyers would pay twice as much for a "seasoned or broken" slave who did not need to transition to the new world. Physical condition, age, immunity to diseases, ability to speak English and temperament all factored into the price as well.

Many new slaves struggled to transition to the Northeast climate and exposure to disease. Even if they survived the journey overseas, many died from smallpox, measles, respiratory ailments, rheumatism and the mumps.

"They died very young, especially compared to white men. The average age of death for a European man was 40 years old. For the bodies we found, analysis showed they died around 20 years old. It shows the life stresses were really tremendous for this group, physically and mentally," said Kathleen Wheeler, of Independent Archaeological Consulting LLC in Portsmouth.

In Portsmouth, very few slave owners had more than one slave, and those who had them represented the upper segment of Portsmouth society, with notable names such Wibird, Walker, Whipple, Warner, Langdon and Odiorn. The duties of slaves varied greatly and were dependent on the occupation of the slave owner. In many cases, they were more like an enslaved apprentice, who became very skilled in important trades by working with their master. Most could read and write because it was in the interest of the owner to have an educated slave.

Slaves went to church every Sunday, and were usually baptized and considered members of the church. They did not sit with their masters, however, as seating was based on wealth, position, sex and social status. Slaves were placed in the second-floor gallery, farthest away from the pulpit, along with Native Americans and troublesome adolescents.

While slaves were allowed little control over many aspects of their lives, they had more control than people assume. They pressed for privileges such as the right to make a sea voyage, to visit loved ones, to work a small garden patch and sell the produce. When negotiations were rebuffed, some slaves refused to work, others pretended they misunderstood, some just left.

"In some cases, the person would come back. They gave themselves a little vacation maybe and went down to visit their sweetie in Newburyport, knowing his owner values him and that he not only would be welcomed back, maybe with a scolding, but because he was valuable property, he may be able to bargain for some privileges, like more trips to Newburyport," Cunningham said.

Throughout the 18th century, N.H. papers frequently ran advertisements for runaway slaves, promising rewards and describing the slaves' clothes and skills. Other advertisements served as warnings to unruly slaves. In October 1771, the New Hampshire Gazette stated three black men convicted of stealing a pig received "15 stripes, well laid on, an example worthy of imitation. We hope this will be a warning to all Negroes and others who make it a constant practice of stealing in this town."

Emancipation did not come easily. The 1783 N.H. Constitution stated "all men are born equally free and independent." This meant those born after 1783 were declared free, but the status of the slaves living in New Hampshire then was never thoroughly clarified. As of the 1840 census, there were still African Americans in servitude in the state, albeit very few.

A commonly accepted date for the end of slavery in New Hampshire is 1857, when an act was passed stating: "No person, because of descent, should be disqualified from becoming a citizen of the state." The act is interpreted as prohibiting slavery. By a strict interpretation, however, slavery was outlawed only on Dec. 6, 1865, when the 13th Amendment of the U. S. Constitution went into effect.

For many, life after slavery was not much different. Their status only improved by their ability to move as they pleased, but

Continued on page 15

#### Continued from page 14

most had difficulty finding good-paying jobs. They were still considered second-class citizens and were treated as such. Many worked at the docks or became entrepreneurs, such as barbers or horse-and-carriage drivers. Some stayed on the Seacoast; others left and never returned.

While the slave trade in Portsmouth was higher than elsewhere in the state, it paled in comparison to other cities, particularly Boston. So many slaves were imported to Boston by 1700 that many residents became concerned and protested against the traffic. By 1720, the African population accounted for 17 percent of the total population, which sparked an influx of white servants from Ireland, which eventually outnumbered black 3-to-1. Africans once made up 23 percent of New York City's population and 16 percent in Newport, R.I., while Portsmouth's never reached more than 4 percent.

"Portsmouth's involvement was typical for the period ... slavery was part of Colonial American history. The fact that we haven't learned it that way is surprising. There were enslaved Africans throughout New England and all the colonies.

The numbers varied, but it was still slavery and the reason there were slaves was the same money. It was economically profitable to enslave others to do their hard work. That's what it was all about, pure and simple," Cunningham said.

Just how many are buried under Portsmouth's city streets is unknown, but archaeologists are certain it's far more than the 13 unearthed in 2003, maybe 200, possibly many more. Poor people and slaves who died during the Colonial era rarely received proper burial, but as the city's memorial for the African Burying Ground Memorial continues to take shape, it ensures they will not be forgotten again.

Sources: "Black Portsmouth," by Mark J. Sammons and Valerie Cunningham; "Slavery in Colonial Portsmouth," by Howard T. Oedel; Macmillan Encyclopedia of World Slavery; "Negro Slavery in Colonial Portsmouth," by Constance Ward; The New Hampshire Gazette, Portsmouth Journal, Portsmouth Herald and Valerie Cunningham.

#### African History in America

1619 First African slaves brought to colonies (Jamestown, VA)

1623 English settlement of Portsmouth NH.

1645 First African in NH sold to "Mr. Williams of Piscataquak"

1705 Portsmouth town meeting reserves burying place.

1705 Virginia lawmakers define slaves as property

1708 New Hampshire census records 70 slaves

1714 NH law makes slaves taxable property

1728-45 Five Portsmouth men captained slave ships in the Triangle Trade

1760 Portsmouth Town Records refer to site as Negro Burying Yard

1764 NH Gazette notice of runaway slave, "Fortune"

1774 First overt act of American Revolution: raid on Fort William & Mary, New Castle

1775 Census 656 slaves in NH primarily located on the coast

1776 Portsmouth's William Whipple signs Declaration of Independence

1779 20 enslaved Portsmouth Africans petition the NH State Government for freedom.

1783 New Hampshire adopts new state Constitution and Bill of Rights

1786 NH Census reports 46 slaves, 303 other blacks

1790 First US Census finds 700,000 slaves. NH reports 158 slaves, 630 free non-whites.

1800 US Census, NH reports 8 slaves; in 1840 reports one slave

**1808** US bans international Slave Trade (but smuggling and domestic trading continues)

1850 Federal Fugitive Slave Act strictly enforced

1857 Slavery in NH formally abolished by amendment to NH Constitution

1863 Emancipation Proclamation

1865 13th Amendment to the US Constitution outlaws slavery.





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### Woodworker crafts caskets for African Burying Ground

By Deborah McDermott

This article first appeared in the Portsmouth Herald on April 19, 2015



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, who will be placed back in the ground this month. He speaks of the detail and sensitivity that went into building the coffins as well as the committee's visions.

Photo by Deb Cram/Seacoastonline



#### A Sense of Place Comes to Life.

We are honored to share our sense of place with the community and those who have gone before us. The completion of the Portsmouth African Burying Ground Memorial Park represents all that is good and true about our town, and that makes us proud every time we step out our front door.

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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 Park this 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 has 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 foreshadow," 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 all right with Cooper, who said it's been an honor to be part of the African Burying Ground process.

As a Jew, he said, he is part of a minority, "but because 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 Mokeme of the Museum of African Art and Culture in Portland, Maine, and Michael Blakey, who was heavily involved in the African Burial Ground National 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."

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, who will be placed back in the ground this month.

Photo by Deb Cram/Seacoastonline





# Without a sense of caving, there can be no sense of community. ~Anthony J. D'Angelo

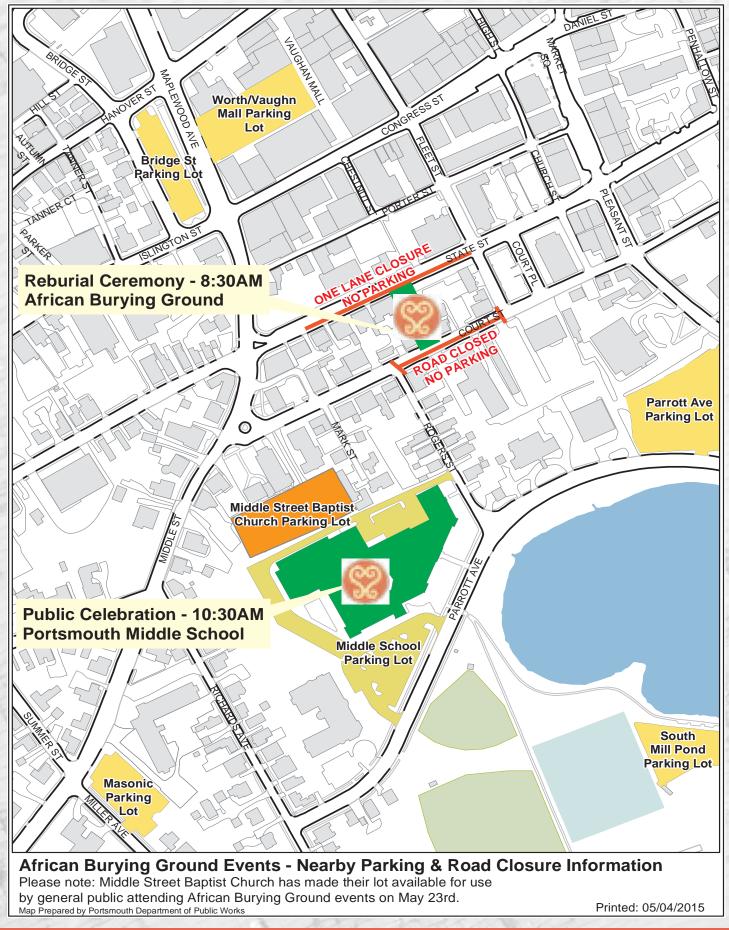
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