



The cap stone is placed over the grave, the last major act of the construction team at the African Burying Ground Memorial in Portsmouth. In the photo, guiding the cover from left to right are: Project Artist Jerome Meadows, Project Managers Mark Hogan, Justin Gamester and Booth Hemmingway from general contractor Piscataqua Landscaping and Charlie Anderson of Full Circle Stone Works, lead mason for stonework, in the loader. Todd Croteau of the City of Portsmouth, Jack Kareckas of CMA Engineers and Landscape Architect Robbi Woodburn of Woodburn and Co. are in the background to the right. COURTESY PHOTO

Engineer for African Burying Ground Memorial to speak

Event being hosted by South Berwick library

SOUTH BERWICK, Maine — Being engineer for the African Burying Ground Memorial Park was not your everyday nuts and bolts job.

To begin with, engineer Jack Kareckas of South Berwick was told the project construction team should not dig more than six inches below the ground. The dead were not to be disturbed.

Furthermore, Kareckas knew that every step of the way he wanted to honor the memory of the 13 Africans found buried under Chestnut Street in Portsmouth just as he wanted to respect the design priorities of a group of African American citizens, historians, archaeologists and community leaders on the African Burying Ground Committee who had taken on the job of memorializing the dead.

"A group of people were doing their best to speak on behalf of the 17th and 18th century men, women and children whose voices had been forgotten for more than 200 years," said Kareckas, a construction inspector with CMA Engineers. "And I knew my job was to listen, learn and do my best to put into concrete and stone the wishes of these people."

Kareckas will speak at 7 p.m. Wednesday, Feb. 3 at the South Berwick Public Library about his experience as the city of Portsmouth's clerk and on-site representative for the African Burying Ground Memorial at a conversation on history and race called "Buried History: a Discussion of Portsmouth's African Burying Ground." He will be part of a panel, also featuring Valerie Cunningham of Portsmouth, founder of the Portsmouth Black Heritage Trail, and JerriAnne Boggis,

director of the Portsmouth Black Heritage Trail.

The African Burying Ground in Portsmouth is one of the earliest documented African burying grounds in New England. This burying ground probably was active as early as the 1600s but as Portsmouth expanded during the late 18th century, the area was built over and many forgot of its existence.

The Portsmouth mayor appointed the African Burying Ground Committee and asked the group to advise the City Council on how best to proceed with the Chestnut Street part of the Burying Ground, where it was now confirmed that other burials exist, and to determine how the exhumed human remains should be reinterred. The committee was comprised of representatives from the Seacoast African American Cultural Center, Portsmouth Black Heritage Trail, Inc. and the Seacoast community.

The committee, through community forums and consultation with appropriate state and city authorities, archaeologists and a professional design team, a memorial park was created. "We Stand in Honor of Those Forgotten," the title of a poem written by the project artist, Jerome Meadows, is used at the site to indicate the purpose of this park as a public place of remembrance where the buried would never again be forgotten.

The panel will consider such questions as why the press covered the site of the historic African Burying Ground as if it were a new discovery, although it wasn't, and what was the process of determining if and how a memorial would be created.

"We wanted to put together a program at the library that would provide interesting historical information at the

same time it encouraged conversations around collateral racial issues," said Karen Eger, South Berwick librarian. "A beautiful memorial is a starting point for conversation but doesn't solve the issues."

Cunningham said she and Boggis are glad to be heading into Maine to expand the conversation about the meaning of the burying ground into a community with its own forgotten histories.

"This is where the story begins — and the struggle continues," Cunningham said.

Audience members will be invited to join in the discussion of this project and its relevance in today's landscape of race relations.

February's panel is the third in a series on race at South Berwick Library called "Why Race Matters in South Berwick." The first session in February addressed the general question asked in the series name. The second session last spring, called "How do we respond in South Berwick?" looked at recent race-related incidents in Maine, and invited residents to discuss ways to interpret and respond to these incidents.

Later this spring the library hopes to hold a workshop on discussing issues of race with children.

According to Kareckas, the artist, designer and construction team did their best to understand and respect the wishes of those representing the descendent community of those buried there.

"Now," he said, "the physical work is done and the memorial is the voice...and we stand back to hear and observe the results."

For information on the upcoming event, call the library at (207) 384-3008. Visit africanburyinggroundnh.org for information on the memorial.