A proper burial

Portsmouth woodworker crafts caskets for Africans’ remains

Deborah McDermott | dmcdermott@seacoastonline.com

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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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 we 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 (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." The symbol will mirror the Sankofa mosaic on a lid that will be placed atop the case 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 handwriting 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 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 Listen, 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 ABC 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, but 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 come 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 reentered. 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 Mokose 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 and hill 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."