

‘FEAR NOT. BE NOT AFRAID.’



Chief Oscar Mokeme performs a consecration ritual and final reburial rites during the African Burying Ground Memorial Park reburial ceremony in Portsmouth on Saturday. PHOTOS BY IOANNA RAPTIS/SEACOASTONLINE

Through tears, peace, pain, African souls laid to rest

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PORTSMOUTH — In the end is the beginning — of healing, of reparation, of dignity. In the end is the beginning of the journey to heaven where, in the words of singer Mahalia Jackson, it will always be howdy, howdy and it will never be goodbye. In the end, is the beginning of many tears, of much laughter, of searing pain made transcendent.

“I have tears of joy today,”

said Vernis Jackson, chair of the African Burying Ground Memorial Committee. She spoke as she looked out over a multitude of people, black and white, gathered Saturday morning on sacred ground to witness the reburial of the souls of 13 Africans brought to this country as slaves. “I didn’t think that this was possible when I first came to Portsmouth many years ago, that we could come together as a community. It

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A day to remember

See a gallery of photographs of this weekend's African Burying Ground Memorial events at seacoastonline.com



Hundreds crowded together on Chestnut Street to attend the African Burying Ground reburial ceremony on Saturday morning.



Jerome Meadows, sculptor of the Portsmouth African Burying Ground memorial, stands by one of his works as it is unveiled during the reburial ceremony on Saturday. PHOTO BY IOANNA RAPTIS/SEACOASTONLINE

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In words meant to shake complacency and bind wounds, voices spoke on the grounds of the African Burying Ground Memorial Park and earlier, at services held at New Hope Baptist Church — services held during a night-long vigil with the caskets holding the remains of the city's African forebears.

Voices spoke of the Middle Passage, the travel from Africa to American ports like Portsmouth, on ships “where people were treated like farm animals, and like farm animals they were bought and sold, and like animals, when they died they were discarded,” said Portsmouth resident George Carsisle. “To make matters worse, they were not buried like others, they were just kind of thrown away — no names, no headstones, nothing to tell

us who they were, what they did, who they loved. It's like they never existed.”

Voices spoke of life here, in this city, and throughout slave-holding America all those hundreds of years ago. In services Friday night, at midnight, and again on Saturday morning, stories were told, powerful, moving stories written by Portsmouth archaeologist Kathleen Wheeler, stories of the ancestors.

One told of a man, a slave,

who witnessed a baby being ripped from the arms of his mother. As recited at the Saturday morning service by Kevin Wade Mitchell, the woman screamed.

“They took my baby. Please don't let them take my baby.” The woman cries but we must stand mute with anger. I look at the other men and I see nostrils flare as the sole sign of fury,” he said. “The woman slumps to the ground, into a grave pit, begging to be buried alive.

‘I am nothing without my child.’ We know she is forever married to death, even as she walks among us.”

But over and over again, voices spoke of the Rivers of Babylon, of the sweet chariot coming for to carry them home, of the indisputable fact that soon and very soon they were going to see the King, of a heaven that waits for them.

Rev. Lillian Buckley of Kittery, Maine, said Mahalia Jackson saw heaven as

a place of howdy, howdy. Buckley harkened to the figures at the memorial park — of a Portsmouth slave and of Mother Africa, their hands so close to touching but in the end not touching at all.

“To be removed from a loved one often felt to be worse than death,” she said. But heaven, she said, that was a place where they were happy to go.

“Heaven was a place

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where they would be with people who would love them and treasure them. Having power over the future was heaven," she said.

And while the pain of the past was everywhere present this weekend, voices also spoke of a healing, as Vernis Jackson said, a coming together.

The care and love was evident as scores of African American pallbearers reverently carried the caskets from New Hope Baptist Church to a waiting hearse, and then from a horse-drawn caisson to a crypt at the Memorial Park.

As he scattered ash and sand on the caskets, Nigerian chief Oscar Mokeme of Portland, Maine, said the spirits yearned to be heard and the people of today listened across the chasm of time.

"Today," he said, "we are carrying these bones to be placed in a cave of honor. We say, 'We felt your pain. We felt what you went through. Fear not. Be not afraid. Let your bones be still. Know that in this cave, you will be remembered always. God grant them a peaceful resting place.'"

Read more on Seacoastonline's African Burying Ground page at www.seacoastonline.com/africanburyingground.



The caskets are lowered into the burial vault to be laid to rest during the African Burying Ground ceremony in Portsmouth on Saturday. PHOTOS BY IOANNA RAPTIS/SEACOASTONLINE



ABOVE: Valerie Cunningham, founder of the Portsmouth Black Heritage Trail, and Rev. Robert Thompson, minister at Phillips Exeter Academy, share a moment during the African Burying Ground Memorial Park reburial ceremony on Saturday in Portsmouth.

LEFT: A horse-drawn caisson with caskets leads the procession down State Street in Portsmouth to the burial vault during the reburial ceremony on Saturday.