PORTSMOUTH — The souls of those who will be reburied at the African Burying Ground Memorial Park later this month were yearning to be found. Of that, Kelvin Edwards has no doubt.

“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 descendent 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 steering 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 can rest in peace and where we can continue to celebrate your life.’”

The public event to honor the return of the reburials of the Fallen in New Hope Baptist Church and in the park will begin Friday evening, May 22, with a night-long vigil at New Hope Baptist Church in Portland, followed by a burial ceremony at the site of the original park on Monday.

But arrangements for the reburials will actually begin several days before the ceremony, when 20 womenakers from the South and a Morehouse Corps of women from the South who will gather to prepare the remains. Mokeme said this is traditional in many West African countries, and that it is a tradition he remembers from his African American friends and family.

The remains, which have been in storage since they were first removed following the routine utility work conducted by the city in 2003, will be prepared in a most symbolic and thoughtful way. First, the remains will be taken to Portsmouth woodworker Jeff Cooper to be lined with shrouds. In a multi-layered, multicolored, and most of the shrouds are from the early 18th century, which are used to build the Coffin Point house that was in the 18th century and became North American – an African-American house that was owned by Hazard and Chardon Street.

When the coffins were removed by the current owner during reconstruction, Coffin Point resident Peter Lamb asked if he could have them and built a timber frame workshop. What he didn’t use himself, the women will prepare the remains using white linen - white for purity, so we put them back into the earth with peace,” said Mokeme. As they were left, they were wrapped in red ribbon, which Mokeme said signifies “life and hope, 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 womenakers preparing the remains. She said she understands that the words “human remains” must be used because they are the most respectful of the descendants.

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But “there’s a lot of love,” 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 the women who are invited to participate in the preparation, “we could hear in their voices that they were not overcome by the sense of responsibility and honor and reverence they were going to bring with them.”

The prepared coffins will be taken by hearse and kept at the Jerse Family Cemetery and held at the Jerse Family Cemetery and held at the Jerse Family Cemetery.

Vigil Information

Those who would like to sing, pray, or otherwise participate in the all-night vigil are invited to contact Jerry Ann Boggs at jabboggs@comcast.net, or Kevin Edwards, kelewda@comcast.net. Please send your name, phone number, and address, and you will be contacted. The tribute will be made, and the time you will be at the church.

For more information on the burial ceremonies or to request information on the activities planned, visit www.noburyinggroundnh.org

Kei Edwards and Valerie Cunningham open the doors of the New Hope Baptist Church where an overnight vigil will be held May 22 over the coffins containing the remains of the city’s earliest African-American residents, both free and slave, discovered during infrastructure improvement work on Chestnut Street in Portsmouth in October 2019.

Photo by Jeff Cooper, Sea Coastonline