

# No Longer Forgotten

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## Portsmouth's African Burying Ground Memorial Park prepares to open

by Beth LaMontagne Hall

Kathy Wheeler wasn't surprised to hear her phone ring on the morning of Oct. 7, 2003. She knew construction crews were working on a sewer project on Chestnut Street in Portsmouth and had warned them of what might lie beneath. When she answered, the field engineer said, "I think we have something."

That something was the base of a hexagonal coffin. As the principal investigator for Independent Archaeological Consulting, Wheeler knew the area was marked on early Portsmouth maps as a "negro burying ground," and her team had deemed the area "highly sensitive" in 2001. Some city

officials and a few members of the city's African-American community knew the history of Chestnut Street, too, but the majority of Portsmouth residents who walked along this downtown side street were unaware of what lay beneath.

"I was shocked, as many people were at that time," said Vernis Jackson, chairwoman of the city's African Burying Ground Committee and one of the first people contacted when it was rediscovered. "Not only was I shocked, but I was surprised that this place could be kept almost in secret for that long and people like me did not know about it. People bought property there, built their homes and their businesses there, knowing nothing about it."



African Burying Ground Committee chair Vernis Jackson

Over the next six days, the remains of eight people were removed from seven grave shafts. With the removal of each coffin, more remains were revealed. The team decided to leave five other discovered burials in the ground to prevent uncovering even more graves. Based on the area outlined in old maps and the density of graves found, Wheeler estimates there could be as many as 200 people buried in the Chestnut Street area.

Since that discovery, Portsmouth has been planning how "to honor those forgotten," the memorial's unofficial motto. On Saturday, May 23, Portsmouth will reinter the remains of the eight people found and honor them with a series of services and celebrations. Getting the community involved was key, Jackson said, not only for fundraising \$1.2 million for the project, but for ensuring those buried there are remembered.

"Above all else, we wanted to make sure that the persons interred there were honored in a very respectful way," said Jackson.

The memorial is the culmination of more than a decade of work by dozens of Seacoast residents, artists, designers, students, city officials, and others. Jerome Meadows, a Savannah, Ga. artist, and Roberta Woodburn, a landscape architect from Newmarket, designed much of the memorial park. Students from Portsmouth Middle School, aided by art teachers Anna Nuttall and Deirdre Shea, designed ceramic tiles installed on the fence surrounding the park. And Portsmouth woodworker Jeffrey Cooper built the caskets in which the bodies will be placed before they are reinterred.



Project designers Jerome Meadows (second from right) and Roberta Woodburn (far right) meet with members of the African Burying Ground Committee.

More than 10 years after all the study and organizing for the memorial, one question still lingers — how could an entire cemetery be forgotten?

“For many reasons, these cemeteries were often neglected and often built on relatively unwanted pieces of land,” said Dr. Michael Blakey, National Endowment for the Humanities professor at the College of William and Mary, who also led the excavation of an African burial ground discovered in Manhattan in 1991. “In New York, its use ended in the 1790s and was filled in with soil and re-appropriated by landowners who, over time, built what they wanted. It was literally buried.”

Burials ended in Portsmouth’s African cemetery around the same time, but maps of the city 60 years later show no sign of it. Tangible evidence of the Africans who once lived here was literally buried as well.

Portsmouth’s African burial ground is unique — 18th-century cemeteries for African slaves are rare — but their existence is not unusual. Slaves lived nearly everywhere in colonial America, said Blakey. Because they were denied even basic human rights, burials played an important role in their lives.

“Slavery was about making full use of those human skills while denying the humanity of those people,” said Blakey. “A cemetery becomes very important because it’s a fundamental way of expressing, certainly among Africans themselves, their humanity.”



Wood sculptor Jeffrey Cooper created nine customized caskets that will be used to reinter the remains exhumed in 2003 in a vault at the memorial.

In New York, Blakey worked closely with the African-American community, reconciling the sensitive line between research and respect for human remains. Blakey said the community wanted to know about the people who were buried there and where they came from. Jackson and other local African-Americans had similar questions.

“We wanted to know who,” said Jackson. “Who’s there?”

Although their identities remain unknown, the archaeological research revealed some clues, such as African genetic markers in some remains. Signs that lower incisors were removed and teeth were shaped in some remains pointed to cultural practices in certain regions of Africa, including South West Africa and the Western Cape. Bones showed some of the people buried in the cemetery were regularly doing strenuous work and most died in their teens, 20s, and early 30s.

“They were working very hard under very severe conditions,” said Wheeler.



an artist's approximation of the graves underneath Chestnut Street

More than 200 years after they were laid to rest, Jackson hopes the memorial and its accompanying display in the Seacoast African American Cultural Center in Portsmouth will remind coming generations of their contributions to our city. The unearthing of these remains provided small yet invaluable bits of knowledge Portsmouth can now use to carry on their memory.

“We are learning their stories now,” said Wheeler. “They are whispers, but when we listen, we can hear their stories.”

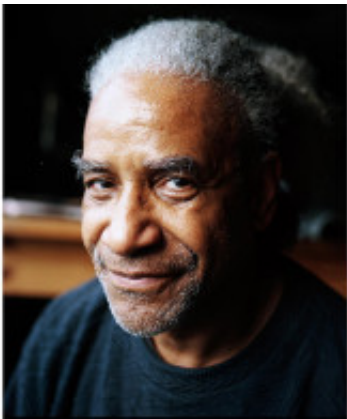
## **Honor and remembrance**

Along with the public opening on May 23, vigils, celebrations, concerts, and discussions will mark the opening of the African Burying Ground Memorial. All events are open to the public.

Wednesday, May 20: Portsmouth Middle School students join memorial sculptor Jerome Meadows at the memorial park on Chestnut Street for an artist discussion and unveiling of tiles they designed to line the park's decorative railing.



Thursday, May 21: Meadows will speak as part of a community forum on public art hosted by Art-Speak, the city's cultural commission, at 6:30 p.m. at 3S Artspace, 319 Vaughan St., Portsmouth.



Artist Jerome Meadows speaks at 3S Artspace on Thursday.

Friday, May 22: New Hope Baptist Church, located at 263 Peverly Hill Road in Portsmouth, will host an ancestral vigil through the evening and into the next morning. Services are at 7 p.m., midnight, and 7 a.m. the next day and include opportunities for the community to participate.

Saturday, May 23: The day's events begin at 8:30 a.m. on Chestnut Street, where Meadows will unveil the African Burying Ground memorial artwork. A reburial ceremony follows at 9 a.m. At 10:30 a.m., a public celebration will be held at the Portsmouth Middle School, located on Parrot Avenue. A site walk follows at 1:30 p.m. And, at 7 p.m., the Blind Boys of Alabama perform at The Music Hall, 28 Chestnut St., Portsmouth.



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