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Williams: On memorials to the enslaved, we can learn from New England city

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Posted: Thursday, May 28, 2015 10:30 pm

MICHAEL PAUL WILLIAMS

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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. Ioanna Raptis/Seacoastonline



More from Michael Paul Williams



Read more commentary on life in Richmond from Times-Dispatch columnist Michael Paul Williams.

The Sankofa, a West African Adinkra symbol that means “Return and Get It — Learn from the Past,” is the insignia of the new African Burying Ground Memorial Park in Portsmouth, N.H.

Richmond could learn not only from its past, but also from the contemporary journey that resulted in a New England city realizing what Richmond has yet to achieve: a prominent park memorializing its slave-trading heritage.

During the Memorial Day weekend, Portsmouth held a “reburial” ceremony as part of the unveiling of its African Burying Ground Memorial Park, a block-long stretch of sculptures, brickwork, tiles and plantings resonant with poignant history.

The park’s primary feature is a granite slab with Mother Africa on one side and a representation of Portsmouth’s first enslaved African, circa 1645, on the other. Their hands are not quite touching, a symbolic separation of the man and his homeland.

Serving as connective tissue in the park are words from a 1779 petition by enslaved Portsmouth black men to the



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New Hampshire legislature, seeking the same freedom as others in a nascent nation and in a state whose motto would eventually become "Live Free or Die."

Eight abstract metallic sculptures of nameless, faceless people bear messages such as, "I stand for those who feel anger," "I stand for those who suffered the Middle Passage," "I stand for those who survived upon these shores" and "I stand for those who find dignity in these bones." Ceramic tiles with African

symbols were created by Portsmouth Middle School students, with an assist by the site's artist and sculptor, Jerome Meadows of Savannah, Ga.

Finally, a circular portal leads to a vault beneath the ground that houses nine caskets — eight with known remains, a ninth with scattered unidentified bones.

"This has been an emotional journey for me, because when I first came here, I didn't think that anybody would ever think in terms of honoring Africans in this manner," said Vernis Jackson, founder of the Seacoast African American Cultural Center and chairwoman of the Portsmouth African Burying Ground Committee.

Volunteers raised more than \$1.1 million for the park, and the city of Portsmouth contributed \$250,000 toward the project's construction. "To me, it's just an example of what people can do in a community, no matter what color they are," she said.

Jackson, a retired elementary school teacher who moved to New Hampshire from Savannah in 1963, and Valerie Cunningham, founding member of the Portsmouth Black History Trail, are no strangers to Richmond's efforts to reclaim its black heritage.

It's ironic, and more than a little embarrassing, that a New England city with a black population of less than 2 percent achieved the sort of commemoration that has evaded the former capital of the Confederacy and what was once one of the nation's busiest slave-trading markets.

But it didn't happen overnight in Portsmouth.

Folks knew that the area around Chestnut Street was the site of an African burial site. In fact, the Portsmouth Black History Trail placed a bronze marker at the site in 2000. But its presence beneath a city street and various buildings beyond Chestnut (as many as 200 graves are suspected) placed the cemetery out of sight and out of mind.

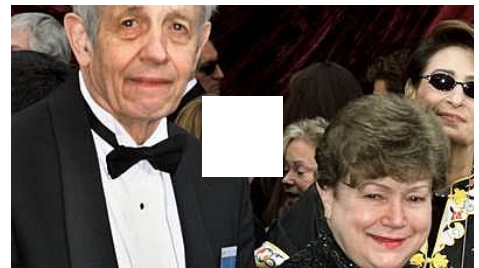
But on Oct. 7, 2003, during a utilities project, city workers unearthed the remains of disintegrating wooden coffins.

"It's part of that history that we find convenient to forget," Cunningham said. "The day that the city workers brought up a board and it was identified as part of a coffin, that is what showed up on the front pages or TV. So seeing is believing."

Eight caskets were damaged and had to be removed, with the remains placed in new coffins. "In that small excavated area, they could also see that there were five more coffins buried there, but they were not damaged so they were left in place," Cunningham said.

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In 2004, the Portsmouth City Council created the African Burying Ground Committee, including representatives from the Seacoast African American Cultural Center and the Portsmouth Black Heritage Trail, as well as members of the City Council, to plan the next step.

“We held public forums, discussed, debated and considered all things and advised the council to close off the street and create a memorial,” Cunningham said. “It took 12 years, but it got done.”

According to Cunningham, the block has one or two residential buildings but is mostly commercial. Everyone was OK with the memorial as long as they had access to their buildings. A couple of the businesses were major donors, she said. “And why not? Now they’re on a doubly historic site. And it’s beautiful. It sure looks better than a street with parking meters on it.”

In the lead-up to Memorial Day weekend, after a harsh winter even by New England standards, the finishing touches were put on the memorial site in preparation for the reburial ceremony.

From Friday at sunset until sunrise the following day, vigils marked the occasion. On Saturday, nine rose-covered caskets were sealed in the vault with a cover adorned with the Adinkra symbol.

“It has been the most moving thing I’ve ever been involved in,” said Amy Pollard, a Queens, N.Y., transplant who is a board member and volunteer coordinator at the Seacoast African American Cultural Center.

Pollard was familiar with the controversy surrounding the discovery of an African burial ground in New York’s financial district. What unfolded in Portsmouth was less contentious, she said. And already, tourists are snapping photos at the site.

Cunningham hopes to learn more about individuals buried there. (“They’re our ancestors. They were members of our community.”) But everyone involved made it clear this is bigger than Portsmouth, a city of 21,000 residents.

“This sort of park will engender so many conversations about race,” said Pollard, who, unlike Cunningham and Jackson, is white. “We have to acknowledge it, and literally, we cannot just bury it.”

Or as Cunningham said: “This is part of our combined history. And the more we learn about what happened then will help us understand what’s happening to us now, in Ferguson, in Baltimore, and in Portsmouth, New Hampshire.”

What happened on Chestnut Street in Portsmouth is a remarkable story about a city not merely owning up to a tragic slave-trading past, but also embracing it for its intrinsic lessons.

Jackson is proud of the park “to the absolute nth degree. I could not be prouder of how this community came together. ... It’s just a testament to what can happen.”

If it can happen there, what’s stopping it from happening here? It’s long past time we got it, and learned from our past.

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When traveling to Pittsburgh last weekend I finally discovered a solution to the on-going ball park issue. There is an area in Pittsburgh called the Slip which is very much like our Shockoe Bottom right on the river full of old buildings. It sits directly opposite the river from PNC Bank and there is a bridge (I couldn't tell if it was pedestrian-only or had sufficient width for vehicle and pedestrian traffic) linking the two and it was packed on a Saturday afternoon ahead of a Pirates game. So here is my plan; put the stadium in Manchester (which has been mooted before) improve Manchester Bridge or put in a pedestrian-only passage like the Millennium Bridge in London, do up the historic areas around Lumpkins Jail properly and revamp the Bottom. Manchester is already growing with the hipsters and this will bring families to the area to get entertainment and education. Until I saw this in action I was dead-set again moving the ballpark off of the Boulevard but I really think this needs to be explored!

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Joe Hoff

I think we need to look to Liverpool, England, one of the 3 cities designated as part of the slavery triangle. Last year, the International Slavery Museum (<http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/ism/>) opened. It not only focuses on the past but also on contemporary slavery.

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