Souls have finally gotten a voice

**Park to make Portsmouth’s African Burying Ground sacred**

BY DEBORAH MCDERMOTT  
dmcdermott@seacoastonline.com

PORTSMOUTH — In West African cultures, there is a tradition called “paying libation.” It is a ritual of giving homage to the ancestors, to thank them for their time on earth and to seek their guidance and protection in future endeavors.

At its heart, the African Burying Ground Memorial Park has always been about paying libation, say those who have been involved for more than a decade in its creation.

“It’s unique and immensely satisfying, the degree to which Portsmouth has come to understand the sacredness of the site,” said sculptor Jerome Meadows, of Savannah, Ga., who designed the park. “They have risen to their higher nature and paid respect to those who in the past have been ill-treated.”

It is a park that has sparked the attention of archaeologists, historians and African diaspora groups.

See MEMORIAL, Page A5

Sculptor Jerome Meadows of Savannah, Ga., who designed the park.
MEMORIAL: Hallowed ground

Continued from page A1

experts from around the county, and for a number of reasons.

For one, the African Burying Ground on Chestnut Street and the African Burial Ground in New York City are the only authenticated northern United States sites where forensic analysis confirms the presence of Africans dating back to the Colonial era.

"Other, African burying grounds date to the 19th century but not the 18th century," said Kathleen Wheeler of Independent Archaeological Consulting, the consulting archaeologist on the project.

Just as important, say those involved in the park project, is how the city and its residents responded when the remains of 15 Africans were unearthed at Chestnut Street during routine utility work. The city held public hearings, listened to its residents and formed the African Burying Ground Committee to create a lasting memorial for the site.

"They have been paying lip service, and honoring the souls buried there in a spiritual kind of way," Meadows said. "I haven't experienced that kind of thing." When work begins on the park on Monday — work that is expected to be completed by mid-November — another important distinction will come into play. It is being built directly over a cemetery. For that reason, extraordinary measures were taken in its design and will be taken in its construction as the surrounding neighborhood pays special attention to ensure no further intact remains are disturbed.

The burying ground

The Chestnut Street area of the city was identified as early as 1705 as the city's Negro Burying Yard. A report by Wheeler wrote for the city indicates that by the 1790s the burying ground was "the city's most magnificent and prominent burials of that period." As urban expansion occurred in Portsmouth, the burying ground was disturbed, Wheeler said in her report. An 1853 newspaper account described work at the site as "a most remarkable instance of Negro remains" and gave the following account of a gas pipe line:

"An 1853 report indicated bodies were still being unearthed in that section of town. When the remains were discovered in 2003, Simmons and Cunningham state, "within minutes, members of the city's black community were on hand, as were city historians. Portsmouth officials and curious onlookers were able to view the remains as they were returned to the city and remain on city property awaiting reinterment.

Testing showed the average age of death among these Africans as early in adulthood. One had a bone infection; another showed signs of inflammation. There are signs of "possible intermittent childhood malnutrition or infectious stress" but sign of trauma before or at the time of death.

They were buried in simple pine coffins. No artifacts were found with the bodies, though a possible piece of a shroud was discovered.

Interestingly, the discovery came just three days after 419 Africans were reinterred at the African Burial Ground National Monument in New York, said Cunningham and Simmons.

Within a year of the discovery on Chestnut Street, the Mayor's African Burying Ground Committee was formed, comprised of prominent African-American residents and city officials.

"In the past, everyone knew there were people buried there, and they were ignored," Meadows said. "This time, instead of ignoring it, it became a cause celebre. They rose to their highest stature."

The committee quickly determined the best way forward was to create a memorial park on the site. By 2007, it had hired Newmarket-based Woodburn and Company landscape architects, and the following year selected sculptor Meadows.

The $1.1 million price of the project, however, proved daunting when <Newmarket-born> cost came in time the Great Recession in 2008.

However, by the spring of this year all but a small amount of the funding had been raised or pledged. The city alone contributed $10,000 and contributions ranged across the board, from $50,000 from the Northeast Utilities Foundation to $10,000 each from each of the three businesses on Chestnut Street and from the Portsmouth High School Black Student Union.

Meanwhile, the park designers were meeting with city officials and architects to design the park. J. Verne Wood Funeral Home was called, and eight of the 13 remains unearthed were removed with great ceremony. After being returned to the city and remain on city property awaiting reinterment.

"We have had to be extremely sensitive to this site, on multiple levels," Robert Woodburn said. "Not only physically, as we make sure we can build this in a way that doesn't disturb any underlying remains, but emotionally, to the descendent community. I've never worked on anything like this."

"Overruling all is the concern that further remains might be discovered, which could put a halt to construction," Wheeler said. She's worked with designers and the city to reduce the chance of that as much as possible.

"We've got my fingers crossed," she said. "Not only would it put a crimp in a very tight construction schedule, there is a tremendous emotional cost to every bone that comes out of that ground."

"This is the most unique project I've ever been involved with," said Deputy City Manager Dave Allen. "I've built whole institutions and facilities, but this has so much more to it. It's so much more than a typical project. Its significance goes beyond anything I've done."

Portsmouth Community Development Director David Moore added, "It represents an incredible opportunity for us to send a message to the future about how we regard the importance of this site and what happened here."

Meadows said he comes back to the idea of paying lip service. "The will of those souls yearning to be honored has finally been granted," he said. "That's quite something to be a part of."