



CHERYL SENTER PHOTO

Drummer Theo Martey of Manchester, center, bends over to secure his drum at the end of a consecration ceremony in Portsmouth on Sunday. Members of the city's African Burying Ground Memorial committee held a ceremony to consecrate the site of buried slaves.

'Honor the legacy'

Burial ground ceremony held in downtown

BY KAREN DANDURANT
news@seacoastonline.com

PORTSMOUTH — A song promising to remember and love all the “beautiful, free souls” interred in a long-forgotten African-American burial ground closed Sunday’s consecration ceremony honoring the estimated 200 people buried at the site.

The visually stunning African ceremony was led by Chief Oscar Ogugua Mokeme, director of the Museum of

African Culture in Portland, Maine. His imagery and the words in his native Obi language from Nigeria enthralled the people gathered to watch, regardless of age or ethnicity.

African drumming, led by Randy Armstrong, and songs, led by the Rev. Lillian Buckley of Kittery, added to the colorful ceremony.

Mokeme performed a cleansing or purification ceremony called “the pouring of libations.” He mixed three waters — rain, ocean and spring water — and community members were invited to add a pinch of salt, which is part of funeral processions in Africa.

“It is water from heaven, water from

CONSECRATION CEREMONY



Use the SMG Shine app on the photo above to see a video of the ceremony. Download SMG Shine on your phone for free in the App Store or Google Play. Launch the app and let it focus on the newspaper photo above designated with a Shine icon. When the video starts, tap twice on the touch screen, then move your device away from the newspaper and the video will keep playing. Learn more about SMG Shine on Page A3.

the ocean, which is always flowing, and the spring water is from the land of mercy, the depths of the ground to where all things return,” Mokeme said. “Something chased our ancestors here to wake up and make themselves known. We are here because they were forgotten and we need to do something. We will honor the legacy

See CONSECRATION, Page A8



CHERYL SENTER PHOTO

Chief Oscar Ogugua Mokeme performs a consecration ritual on Chestnut Street. Members of the African Burying Ground Memorial committee held a ceremony Sunday to consecrate the site of buried slaves.

CONSECRATION: Burial ground

Continued from page A1

they left for us.”

Before the ceremony, people were encouraged to wear white, or African colors, and to bring white flowers. Many honored the request.

The ceremony preceded a ground breaking today: The start of work on a \$1.2 million project to create a permanent memorial along Chestnut Street. At least 200 people turned out to watch the moving, traditional ceremony.

“We become part of Portsmouth’s future,” Jennifer Stiefel of Dover said. “We honor the people come here to rest. We come to reminisce and remember. The past, present and future are all in our hands here today.”

The Rev. Lauren Smith of South Church offered a prayer of peace, reminding everyone that starting this week, the rest of those souls interred will once again be disturbed.

Portsmouth African-American historian Valerie Cunningham and several other volunteers read through a list of the people who are believed to be buried in the 1705 burial grounds, which were long forgotten until routine road work uncovered several decaying wooden coffins on Oct. 7, 2003.

Cunningham, the author of “Black Portsmouth,” and David Watters, director of the University of New Hampshire Center for New England Culture, who have long been studying slavery in the Granite State, have compiled the list.

As the list of names was read, those who came to watch filed past the altar assembled for the service, each adding salt to the waters gathered by Mokeme.

Dressed as an “Ochendo,” an African guardian of the shadows, Mokeme danced a ceremonial “dance for the unknown soul,” moving through the crowd, offering blessings as he went.

“This spirit I represent is a complicated one,” Mokeme said. “The dance is about pain, joy, life and death. We do not know how these souls died and ended up here. We don’t know what killed them or why they died. We can only humble ourselves and honor their life and their death.”



CHERYL SENTER PHOTO

Chief Oscar Ogugua Mokeme, right, performs an ancestral dance, blessing people as he moves through the crowd on Chestnut Street.



CHERYL SENTER PHOTO

Vernis Jackson of Portsmouth gets blessed during the consecration ceremony held Sunday.

“We can rejoice now and say we did the right thing, city of Portsmouth,” Buckley said.

The memorial park will be located on Chestnut Street, between Court and State streets. David Moore, the city’s community development director, said the street will be closed to through traffic during construction, but access will be maintained for residents.

The park will include a vault to re-inter the remains of eight of 13 individuals who were discovered during the routine road and utility work in 2003. The remaining five remains were left undisturbed.

Central to the project is a granite wall on the State Street end of the memorial park that will have a figure representing “Mother Africa” on one side and a Portsmouth slave on the other.

A state archaeologist and a project archaeologist will be closely monitoring the work throughout the construction. A special re-interment ceremony is expected to take place in the spring.

To stay informed on the project, visit www.african-buryinggroundnh.org.

Staff writer Deborah McDermott contributed to this story.