

AFRICAN BURYING GROUND WORK BEGINS



SHINE THIS STORY

For details on
how to view
a video, see
Page A3

Brett Farr of
Piscataqua
Landscaping
does mea-
surements as
the layout of
the African
Burying Ground
Memorial Park
begins Monday
in Portsmouth.

DEB CRAM
DCRAM@
SEACOAST
ONLINE.COM



Careful construction

Memorial park balances history, local concerns

BY DEBORAH MCDERMOTT
dmcdermott@seacoastononline.com

PORTSMOUTH — How is it possible to build a memorial park over a grave site governed by state law, in an urban setting, on a road that's on a downhill grade and, moreover, has to be

accessed by residents and businesses?

The answer is very thoughtfully, meticulously and respectfully, as everyone involved in constructing the African Burying Ground Memorial Park readies for work to begin on the Chestnut Street site.

"It's been a challenging project," said

landscape architect Roberta Woodburn of Woodburn and Co. in Newmarket. Woodburn and Savannah, Ga., sculptor Jerome Meadows designed the park. "We had to be sensitive to the descendent community and the broader community. At the same

See MEMORIAL, Page A6

MEMORIAL: Park work kicks off

Continued from page A1

time, traffic's coming in there, so how do we approach the design with respect to that? It was daunting, especially at the beginning."

The memorial park is designed using bluestone pavers with a curving red granite line throughout the park. The red ribbon-like line will begin at State Street and end — or figuratively go underground — at the Court Street end near a vault where the remains of Africans discovered in 2003 will be reinterred.

On the red granite will be etched words from the 1779 petition to the New Hampshire Legislature of 20 Portsmouth slaves who sought their freedom.

At the State Street end is a granite wall with two bronze cast statues on either side representing Mother Africa and a Portsmouth slave. Granite curbing is throughout. At the Court Street end are three groups of statues representing "community figures," and a curved fence meant to evoke West African Kente cloth, said sculptor Jerome Meadows.

The first phase of work will take place at the Court Street end, where the majority of the remains were discovered in 2003. Because work will be conducted essentially in a cemetery, state law mandates and the African American community wanted to ensure that as little ground as possible is disturbed.

"If we see any bone, we will stop things until we determine if we are on a new grave site we didn't know about or if it's a small piece of bone mixed up in a jumble of dirt" that's already been disturbed from previous underground work, said Kathleen Wheeler

of Independent Archaeological Consulting in Portsmouth, who will be on site throughout the project.

State archaeologist Richard Boisvert said the key is to ensure that no intact graves are disturbed.

"A good deal has been disturbed already," particularly in a city as old as Portsmouth, he said. "If a grave has miraculously escaped disturbance, an archaeologist will know."

In order to minimize disturbance, that end of Chestnut Street, which slopes downward, will be covered with up to 3 feet of fill. In addition, Woodburn said, she created wide bases for the fence and statues to provide stability. It is hoped that workers should have to only disturb inches of actual soil.

As the project moves uphill, "we know less about those areas," said Community Development Director David Moore. "As a result, we're making sure we follow monitoring protocols. We're exercising an abundance of caution."

Meanwhile, local traffic to businesses and apartments has to be allowed during construction, which is expected to last into November.

Mark Hogan, construction manager at Piscataqua Landscaping, memorial park contractor, said he has already talked with those who live or work on Chestnut Street.

"Everyone's been great," he said. He talked with one man who is getting ready to move out of an apartment, for instance, "and I told him, 'Just tell me when and we can work with you.' I think people understand."

"We all want to see this succeed," he said. "It's a real honor to be working here."