

## WHAT IS IT?

**Sankofa:** According to the local burial ground committee, it's a West African Adinkra symbol meaning, "Return and Get It - Learn from the Past." It was found at the burial ground in New York and will be used in Portsmouth's memorial park.

# Slaves live in memory

*NYC, Port City share solemn similarity as only confirmed northern U.S. burial grounds*

BY DEBORAH MCDERMOTT  
dmcdermott@seacoastonline.com

**N**EW YORK — Portsmouth, which is preparing to erect a memorial to the city's enslaved residents, is not the first northern city to have dealt with the discovery of slave remains and grappled

with ways to honor them.

The African Burial Ground National Monument in New York City and the Portsmouth African Burying Ground share a distinction. They are believed to be the only authenticated northern U.S. sites where forensic analysis of remains have confirmed slaves were buried there. But there are even more parallels

See SLAVE, Page A11



*Funds sought for city memorial*

BY DEBORAH MCDERMOTT  
dmcdermott@seacoastonline.com

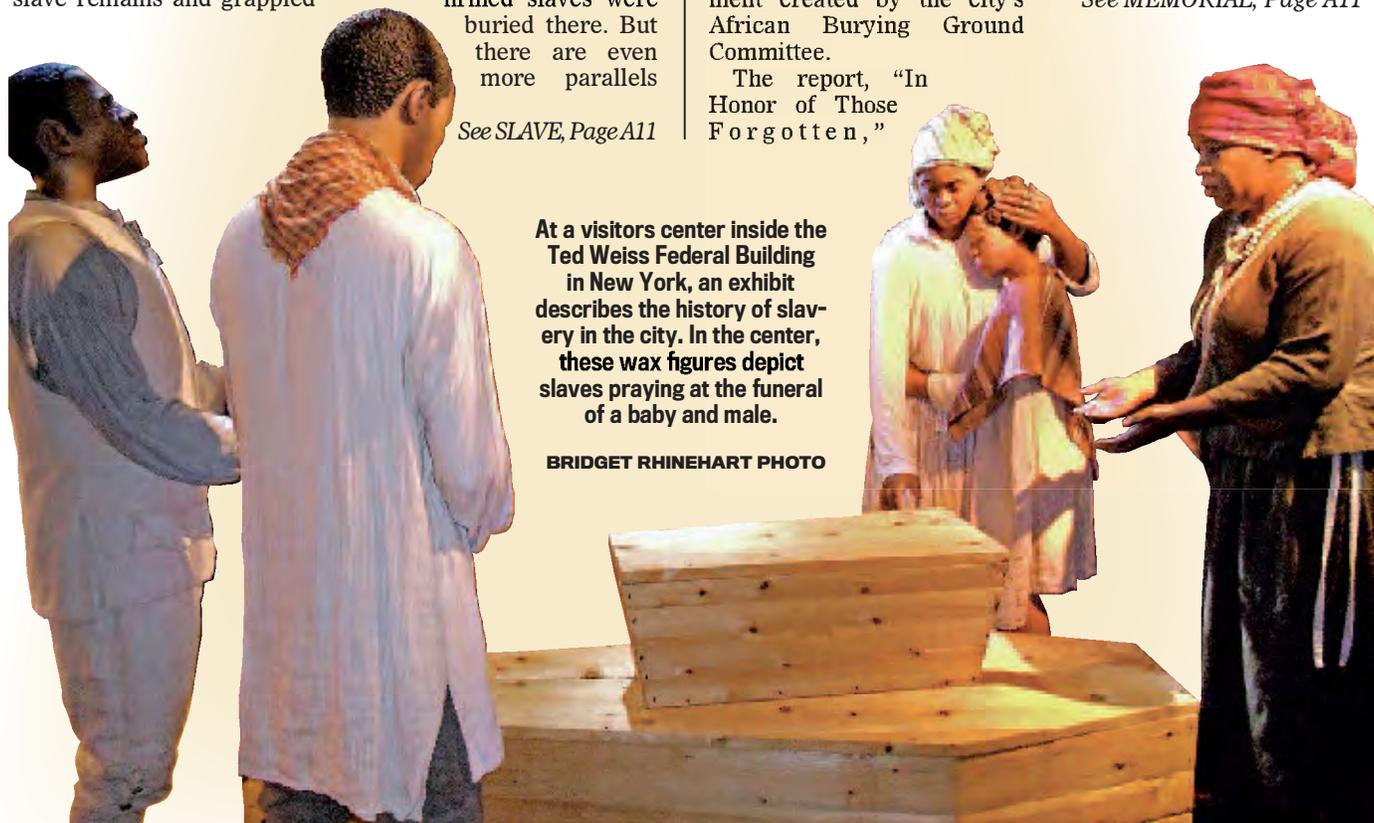
**P**ORTSMOUTH — How could Portsmouth's African Burying Ground have been forgotten?

That provocative question and others are answered in a newly released 10-page document created by the city's African Burying Ground Committee.

The report, "In Honor of Those Forgotten,"

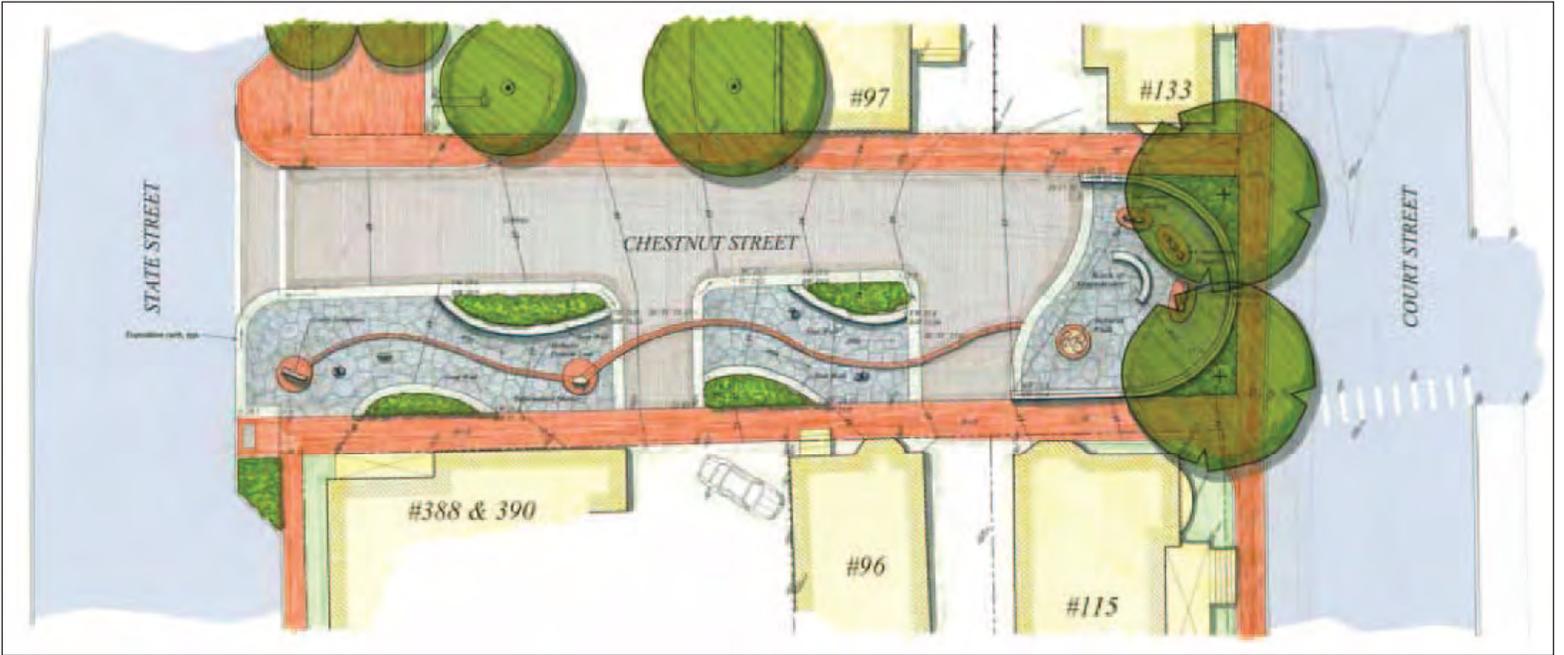
gives a brief history of slavery in Portsmouth, as well as information about plans to build a \$1.1 million memorial park on the Chestnut Street site where the burial ground was discovered in 2003. The report is being used by committee members to apply

See MEMORIAL, Page A11



At a visitors center inside the Ted Weiss Federal Building in New York, an exhibit describes the history of slavery in the city. In the center, these wax figures depict slaves praying at the funeral of a baby and male.

BRIDGET RHINEHART PHOTO



This image shows the proposed African-American Burying Ground memorial, slated to be installed in downtown Portsmouth. Fund raising is under way for the project.

COURTESY ILLUSTRATION

# SLAVE: Cities share historic bond

Continued from page A1

between the burial sites in the large metropolitan New York City and the small seaport city of Portsmouth.

Both the Chestnut Street site and the lower Manhattan site were pasture lands on the outskirts of their cities when enslaved people first started burying their dead there — in New York, perhaps as early as 1644, and in Portsmouth as early as 1705.

By the 1790s, both burying grounds were subsumed into the urban landscapes of their cities during respective economic booms.

While the slave remains were first uncovered in Portsmouth in 2003, the site in New York was discovered 12 years earlier. What has been learned in the 20 years since is both instructive of the history of our country and of the resolve of modern-day African Americans to ensure the slaves are not forgotten.

As it turns out, said National Park Ranger Cyrus Forman as he gave the Herald a tour of the national monument recently, the 419 slaves found in 1991 were just a tiny fraction of those believed buried in the city.

In the 1600s, under Dutch rule and then under British rule, the city limits of New York were confined to a small

area at the bottom of Manhattan where City Hall and the state and federal courts are now located. The rest of the island was pasture land, and it was there that an estimated 10,000 to 20,000 slaves were buried from the mid-17th century through late 18th century.

“They would gather secretly at night,” said Forman, noting dozens of slaves often broke a law stating no more than 12 people could gather for funerals. “As the sun sets and the energy flees the sky, it’s symbolic of the energy surrounding death.”

Much of the burial ground was owned by a Dutch woman, who is believed to have “tacitly allowed Africans to be buried” on her land, Forman said. However, her heirs were not generous, he said, and they were interested in developing her land. Standing in their way was a small, 400-foot mountain that was re-

moved by the spadeful by slaves who covered their ancestors under 24 to 32 feet of fill.

It wasn’t until 1991, when the federal government demolished the building at Broadway and Duane Street in lower Manhattan that the remains of 419 slaves were unearthed. Because the federal building that was subsequently constructed is 30 stories,

construction workers had to dig deep into the ground to lay the foundation, Forman said. Before long, they hit remains.

Forman said it was never the government’s intention to memorialize the site, but when word got out that the slaves had been found, 18 months of protest ensued, grinding construction to a halt. In the end, the remains were sent to Howard University in Washington, D.C., where they were thoroughly studied for the next 10 years.

“From the bones, they could tell the nutrition level of the slave, or if they had diseases. They could also determine the sex, and how they died,” he said.

The evidence revealed that work was hard and short lives often ended violently. Also found was the heart-shaped West African symbol, the Sankofa, which basically means “learn from the past to prepare for the future.”

The Sankofa will also be found at the Portsmouth African Burying Ground and is seen on the Web site, [www.africanburyinggroundnh.org](http://www.africanburyinggroundnh.org).

Outside the federal building in New York is a monument of one-third acre. All 419 slaves have been reinterred, their remains in carved boxes made in Ghana. The indoor visitor center and outdoor memorial are visited by about 140,000 people a year. Thanks to Forman, the memorial is the second most followed national monument on Twitter.

For information on the national monument, visit [www.africanburial-ground.gov](http://www.africanburial-ground.gov).

# MEMORIAL: Port City group seeks funds to build local park

Continued from page A1

for both federal and private grant funding, and they are currently in discussions with the National Education Association and the National Trust for Historic Preservation, she said.

It will also be used to help the committee as it seeks to raise funds for the park.

Several house parties to solicit donations were held over the summer, and committee members were available at Popovers on the Square when the eatery held a fund-raiser there in August.

“Although many people told us they were unaware that there were any enslaved Africans in Portsmouth, they were also very supportive of the project and what it says about Portsmouth today,” said Vernis Jackson, committee chairwoman.

That lack of knowledge is ever present on the minds of the committee, said spokeswoman Stephanie Seacord.

“What we recognize is that we need an information phase to continue with the fund-raising phase,” she said. “We’re getting a lot of positive

## ONLINE

For more on the African Burying Ground, visit [www.africanburying-groundnh.org](http://www.africanburying-groundnh.org). To view or download a copy of the report, click on the “fund-raising case statement” link.

feedback once people understand what it is, but there’s a gap in that knowledge, we’re finding.”

Their work is paying off, though. The group plans to soon announce several major donors. Meanwhile, said Seacord, the memorial park’s designer, sculptor Jerome Meadows of Atlanta, is working on the detail of the two figures that will be depicted — one of a woman representing Africa and one of a man representing a slave in Portsmouth.

Meadows told the committee last week he had been examining photos of historical clothing in museum collections. According to Seacord, he said, “It’s important to me to convey their dignity, their personal strength and their physical strength.”