African Burying Ground dedication was only the beginning.

By J. Dennis Robinson

Like many of you, I was there when Portsmouth city workers uncovered the ancient coffins in the fall of 2003. We stood at the corner of Chestnut and Court streets, peering down past a thin crust of asphalt into the earthen world below. Later, archaeologists in faded blue jeans and colorful hardhats placed their bare hands against the rotted wooden caskets and hoisted them into the world of the living.

In an era before Facebook, smartphones and Twitter, I rushed to post the story on my website. Could this be the legendary Negro Burying Ground, hidden three centuries beneath the pavement, sliced apart by houses, and run through with sewer pipes? DNA evidence soon proved the dead were indeed of African heritage.

We knew this was an historic moment. In a city that touted its well-preserved cemeteries, Portsmouth had conveniently misplaced, and then repurposed, the only graveyard dedicated to black residents. Africans—some undoubtedly kidnapped, sold, renamed, impoverished and marginalized—had been nearly written out of the Portsmouth story.

“The Burying Ground story is complex,” historian Valerie Cunningham

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told me this week. “It is not an easy story to deal with, not easy to talk about. Most people don’t want to deal with the real story.”

**Let the learning begin**

Indeed, the concept of Yankee slavery and northern racism and discrimination can be a tough pill for some to swallow. New Englanders traditionally point to famous white abolitionists, to the Underground Railroad, or to our opposition to slavery in the Civil War as a badge of regional superiority. A friend told me just the other day slavery in the North was “better” than slavery in the South.

“I think you are mistaken,” an out-of-state college professor told me not 20 years ago. We were leaning against the metal fence at Prescott Park watching the river rush toward the Atlantic Ocean. “I doubt there was any slavery going on in colonial Portsmouth,” he said.

But I knew better. I had been privileged to read an early draft of what would become the Portsmouth Black Heritage Trail by Valerie Cunningham. Like so many seaports, north and south, Portsmouth had been deeply involved in the slave trade almost from its inception in the early 1600s. Freed and enslaved Africans were key to the city’s 18th century maritime economy. Prominent local merchants, even Christian ministers, were slave owners. In the 19th century, fast Portsmouth-built ships were used in the illicit slave trade and the northern textile economy was tightly tied to southern cotton plantations.

Valerie’s pioneering study changed Portsmouth history forever. Her work continues to shine a light on the forgotten, we can even say “whitewashed,” local history. Her book “Black Portsmouth” revolutionized the story of New Hampshire’s only seaport, and has drawn tourists, scholars and the merely curious to the city ever since. And every day her research guides me toward a more honest, critical, diverse history of this predominantly white New England city.

**Getting the message right**

Already visitors are finding their way to the new African Burying Ground Memorial Park on Chestnut Street. But will we get the story right? What visitors find there is not always easy to process. It is a unique, flowing space of stone and sculpture. But exactly what happened here is not immediately apparent. The interpretive signs are brief, poignant and polite. There are currently no artifacts of the city’s black history on display, no dedicated exhibit, no video to fill in the blanks.

“The fall out, as I see it,” Valerie says, “is that everybody who thinks they know a little about it is going to write their version of it. The mythology is just going to be multiplied, intensified, glorified and distorted the way history is, especially black history.”

As residents of Portsmouth and the Seacoast, we are all becoming stewards of local black history. And it becomes our job, as best we can, to learn to teach visitors the unvarnished history of the region. Here are three things we should always remember about the African Burying Ground:

1. **We knew it was there.**

The “discovery” of the burials in 2003 was no real surprise to historians. In fact, plaque #10 on the self-guided Portsmouth Black Heritage Trail had been on view at the corner of State and Chestnut streets for years. The location of a “Negro Burying Ground” had been proposed in 1795. It was designated on a map in the mid-1800s. Reports of human remains found in the vicinity during building construction were a matter of public record. With Valerie’s permission, I had posted her research on my website as early as 1997.

2. **Don’t call it a slave cemetery.**

The truth is, we have no evidence yet that the people buried under the street were slaves. It is far to assume that some were. Others may have been freed Africans. Others might be impoverished whites carried to the city’s potter’s field from the nearby almshouse or from Prison Lane, now Porter Street, the alley that runs along The Music Hall. The walking tour brochures refer to them as “the unnamed, unrecorded dead.”

To refer to the site as Portsmouth’s “slave cemetery,” as tempting as this may be for tourism, is to brand and diminish its occupants.

We don’t routinely refer to the Whipple, Langdon, Wentworth, Moffatt, Warner, Stoddle, Stavers, Sherburne, Brewster and other white families as “slave owners.” Yet they and many others were. What we do know is that the remains of those who were exhumed and returned to the earth were of African origin.

“If we think that the only thing that a black person could be was a slave, then we can call it a slave cemetery,” Valerie adds.

3. **We don’t know how big the cemetery is.**

The African Burying Ground park, if I may be allowed this metaphor, is only the tip of the iceberg. The nine coffins ceremoniously placed under the circular burial vault lid represent only 5 percent of 200 bodies that may still lie in an undetermined area nearby. The graveyard may never have been clearly defined. Five other visible cofins, ones not immediately threatened by the city water and sewer lines, were left intact. We cannot know how many burials were moved, found but unreported, or destroyed by expanding progress in the 18th and 19th centuries. And it is not unlikely that future development of the “Old Town by the Sea” will uncover more human remains.

**Only the beginning**

The dedication of the memorial park was the overdue, not the finale. “It isn’t over yet,” Valerie says. “And it never will be over. There will always be unanswered questions.”

Soon, I predict, the discovery of the coffins beneath the street will be as central to Portsmouth history as George Washington’s visit, Paul Revere inciting the raid on Fort William & Mary, the great downtown fires, or the Treaty of Portsmouth that ended the Russo-Japanese War.

What Portsmouth did, in creating the memorial, was wonderful, emotional and right—but it didn’t fix the problem. We cannot repair the past. And, lacking a time machine, I’m not certain we can ever fully understand the past.

The park is, at one level, simply a new place to sit, to ponder and to talk. But that talk is inevitably informed by the surroundings, by the curvature of the stones and the anonymous sculptural figures. I have been to the new park half a dozen times since it opened. It is the first thing my friends want to see when they visit.

Our conversation drifts toward the topic of race, discrimination and diversity. We talk about fairness and equality, about government and law and activism. We are talking, not just about the unnamed people buried under the street. Soon we are talking about what it means to be human.

“I’m not surprised by all the attention the park is getting, because from the beginning, one of my mantras was—this is not just a local story,” Valerie concludes.

Copyright 2015 by J. Dennis Robinson, all rights reserved. Robinson’s history column appears in the print version of the Portsmouth Herald every other Monday. He is the author of 12 books. His latest, “Mystery on the Isles of Shoals,” closes the controversial Smuttynose ax murder case of 1873.

—(See SmuttynoseMuders.com) It is available in local stores and in narrated form by Audible.com. The author can be reached at dennis@seacoastnh.com.