

INTRODUCTION AND SITE REDISCOVERY

In the opening years of the 21st century, the City of Portsmouth endeavored to restore Court Street, one of the primary arteries in the city's historic district. The Court Street Reconstruction Project introduced a new roadbed, separated sewer and stormwater systems beneath the street, built or reconstructed brick sidewalks and granite curbing, and installed period-style lighting along the historic thoroughfare. Independent Archaeological Consulting, LLC (IAC) was involved early in the process, and performed an archaeological sensitivity assessment in 2001 to identify possible archaeological resources in the corridor from Haymarket Square to Marcy Street (Wheeler and Marlatt 2001). The work was authorized under Section 106 of the Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (P.L. 89-665), as amended, and as implemented by regulations of the Advisory Council of Historic Preservation (36 CFR Part 800).

The 18th-century "Negro Burying Ground" now referred to as the "African Burial Ground" was one of the areas designated highly sensitive by the 2001 study, and was believed to be in the general vicinity of Chestnut Street and possibly near the Court Street intersection (Figure 1). Documentary evidence indicates that this segregated burying area for colonial-era African-Americans may have been in use as early as 1705 in what was then the outskirts of town. As Portsmouth expanded during the prosperous 1790s, the burying ground was subsumed into the urban landscape as part of Chestnut Street.

The Portsmouth African Burial Ground probably extended the entire length of the block between State and Court Streets, and as many as 200 graves may still lie beneath the west lane of Chestnut Street. The bounds and extent of the burial ground have been long forgotten even by the 19th century and the sanctity of the resting place has been imposed upon many times since its use was discontinued. A newspaper article from 1853 reports that,

In digging to put down the gas pipes in Court Street, the workmen have disturbed numerous remains of the negroes, who were buried during the days of slavery here, and for some years afterwards. The old negro burial ground occupied that part of Chestnut street, and spread out rather indefinitely into both of them. The jail stood near, and made a kind of Golgotha of that then neglected part of town. Few bodies have been buried there for the last sixty years: it is said one person was buried there about fifty years ago. The workmen found one coffin in tolerable preservation, near the corner of Chestnut and Court streets, containing the bones of a large and tall man. The remains were all reburied (*Daily Morning Chronicle* June 24, 1853).

The 19th-century writer confirms that Portsmouth participated in spatial segregation for Black people "in death as in life," a practice commonplace in the early American colonies. The boundaries of the sanctified ground quickly blurred and were forgotten.

On the morning of October 7, 2003, while excavating a 12-ft hole for a sewer manhole in the west lane of Chestnut Street near the Court Street intersection, the contractor (Gove Construction) encountered the base of a hexagonal coffin and notified IAC immediately through the HTA Engineers representative. Over the course of six working days (from October 7 to 12, 2003), the archaeologists recovered the skeletal remains of eight individuals from seven burial shafts. Two of the burials were stacked (Burials 7 and 12). Five others were identified at the edges of the project impact area but were left undisturbed, bringing the total number of graveshafts to 13 (Figure 2). During the course of the project, archaeologists discovered that a late-19th/early-20th-century sewer line had been dug through or had imposed upon five graveshafts.

Although the wet dense clay preserved the coffin wood fairly well, the osteological material inside the coffins was less well preserved. To insure the preservation of remains, burials were removed *en bloc* (i. e., with both wood and bone encased within the surrounding clay matrix) to a laboratory provided by the City of Portsmouth. Over the winter of 2003-2004, IAC lab technicians spent approximately 500 hours in the laboratory extracting the bone and teeth from the clay matrix. During the lab processing, it became clear exactly how fragmentary and fragile the skeletal remains were. Most burials are represented solely by teeth; others by long bones and teeth; and in one instance (Burial 2), the skeleton was nearly complete, except for the cranium (apparently destroyed by the backhoe when excavating the hole for the sewer manhole).

The rediscovery of the African Burial Ground in October 2003 brought together diverse parties – archaeologists, physical, forensic, and genetic scientists, African-Americans, neighbors, churches, city and state officials, engineers, contractors, and museum administrators – who worked together to successfully address a difficult task. Members of the African-American community were immediately involved in the process and were principal players in defining appropriate research questions and in deciding matters relating to the final deposition of the human remains. Many came to the site to bear witness, offer prayers, and serve as pall bearers as each burial was removed and transported to a temporary facility. Open communication among all parties allowed the effort to progress smoothly despite pressure-packed conditions.

Some, if not all, of the unknown number interred in the Portsmouth African Burial Ground were enslaved Africans or African-Americans, some taken directly from their African homeland and transported to the New World. Because of the paucity of written records regarding the lives of African-Americans in this country, we may never learn their names. Although many questions remain unresolved mostly due to the fragmentary and fragile state of the osteological remains, the archeological evidence revealed during this project permits us to partially reconstruct the demographics of enslaved Africans of the 1700s in terms of sex, age of death, pathology, and lifestyle indicators. In this way, archaeology may offer the only clues to help us understand who these individuals were, how they fared in the community, and how they persisted despite concerted efforts to diffuse their cultural identity in the New World.

The rediscovery of the burial ground has tremendous distinction as the only known African-American cemetery of its age that has been investigated through archaeology in all of New England. This report is primarily descriptive, as we continue to evaluate the data and compare it against other sites of its nature. It is our hope that continued research and publications on this and other sites will permit engaging dialogue with our archaeological peers and members of the African-American community.