Students’ donation brings African Burying Ground fund closer to $1.2M goal

BY DEBORAH MCDERMOTT
dmcdermott@seacoastonline.com

The city’s next generation on Tuesday made a special donation that looks back to the city’s slave forebears and forward to the day that Portsmouth will forever honor them.

The Portsmouth High School Black Student Union contributed $970 to the African Burying Ground Memorial Committee, representing more than a year of fund-raising by the group.

“I think, personally, Portsmouth is very liberal,” said Valeria Agudelo, president of the Black Student Union. “People accept everyone and everything. When I learned about the African

“...closer to becoming a reality today, after the city announced it has signed a contract for the work with Piscataqua Landscaping of Eliot, Maine.

Deputy City Manager David Allen said the goal is to complete work by November, but that is predicated on a number of factors including availability of materials for the project.

Piscataqua Landscaping was the unanimous choice of a selection committee, Allen said. The contract came in at less than the $1.2 million anticipated for the work, he said.

“They hit the proverbial home run,” he said. “Their team was extremely enthusiastic, they had done their homework and

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burying ground, it was surprising. There were slaves in the South, of course. But it was a shock to think those things happened here.”

Agudelo, who just graduated from PHS, as a junior took Dr. Arthur Hilson’s class, “Another View,” which Hilson said “looks at history through the eyes of the disenfranchised.”

It was in that class, Agudelo said, that she learned about the burying ground. In 2003, the remains of 13 Africans were discovered during routine utility work on Chestnut Street. They are believed to be among 200 or more Africans buried in that part of Portsmouth.

The African Burying Ground Committee has been working to raise $1.2 million to build a memorial park to commemorate these mostly enslaved people.

“Mother Africa” on one side and a Portsmouth slave on the other. The wall and the park are designed by artist and sculptor Jerome Meadows of Savannah, Ga., and local landscape architecture firm Woodburn & Company. The project is “unique” in several ways, Allen said. Most important, the contractor will be building a monument over what is essentially a graveyard.

“You don’t have the freedom to just go and dig. There are constraints, given that you’re working at a grave,” he said.

The contractor will be working within a “very thin layer” just below the surface. “All the construction detail is predicated on guidance not to disturb the ground below a certain level,” he said. To ensure there will not be freeze and thaw problems during the winter, he said, a drainage system has also been developed.

“We have followed the project for years and observed the passion and dedication of a great number of people in this community who care about the site’s significance and the people buried there,” Gamester said. “Piscataqua is going to be part of returning this site to sacred ground and we look forward to working with the city and the African Burying Ground Committee.”

To date, the committee and community volunteers have raised more than $1 million toward the $1.2 million goal. Fund-raising efforts will continue for the remaining $165,000.

“I’m so pleased and so happy to get to this milestone,” said committee Chairwoman Vernis Jackson. “We’ve done a lot of work to get to this place, and it’s really paid off.”

Those wishing to help the African Burying Ground Committee raise the remaining funds are asked to visit www.africanburyinggroundnh.org.