

# Letters to the Editor May 26<sup>th</sup> – June 11<sup>th</sup> 2015

## African Burying Ground makes us proud of Portsmouth

Posted May. 27, 2015 at 2:01 AM

May 26 — To the Editor:

What a privilege it is to be a citizen of Portsmouth and to have participated in the dedication of the African Burying Ground! It was a reflective, amazing and extremely moving experience. It is important to reflect on the wrongs of the past and to acknowledge the contributions of our citizens of African heritage. It is a reminder to celebrate our progress but also to remain vigilant against all forms of injustice.

What an honor to be part of a community which "did the right thing" by supporting this ideal and project. What an asset the beautiful and moving memorial park will be for the citizens of Portsmouth as well as for the visitors who will experience it.

Thank you to all who worked tirelessly for so many years to complete this beautiful, moving and amazing memorial.

**Pat and Mike Shea**

Portsmouth

## Proud that Portsmouth has righted a wrong

Posted May. 27, 2015 at 2:01 AM

May 26 — To the Editor:

Subject: African Burial Ground

The French Historian Alexis de Tocqueville once wrote, "The greatness of America lies not in being more enlightened than any other nation, but rather in her ability to repair her faults."

As a life-long resident of Portsmouth, I could not be more proud of our fair city than I am now after witnessing the re-interment of those forgotten and overlooked souls discovered under Chestnut Street in an unmarked and long forgotten graveyard

Portsmouth may stand tall knowing that a wrong has been righted, a measure of justice done, and the lost found and recognized in a moving ceremony.

They are now permanently remembered in a worthy memorial.

Thank you to all who were involved in this effort and let no one say that this City is not about justice for all.

**Bob Shouse**

Portsmouth

## **African Burying Ground an 'awesome endeavor'**

Posted Jun. 1, 2015 at 2:01 AM

May 30 — To the Editor:

On Saturday, May 23, in the new Portsmouth Middle School auditorium, I joined with the African Burying Ground Committee, community volunteers, and many Portsmouth residents and visitors to celebrate the completion and consecration of the African Burying Ground Memorial Park, located on Chestnut Street.

What an awesome endeavor and response to the 2003 discovery of a piece of early American Colonial history that had lain hidden and forgotten beneath our city streets – a burying ground for Africans, many who had suffered the pain and indignity of slavery. The committee, volunteers, city staff, and donors all deserve our appreciation for the years of planning and work to establish this burying ground and monument as a permanent reminder of those forgotten, but now remembered.

As I sat and took in the expressions and prayers of the speakers, my thoughts went back to the life and times of 18th-century Portsmouth – so remote, yet made much closer now. I couldn't help but imagine with dismay the innumerable prayers of distraught African slaves, prayers born of agony, desperation, and hopelessness, prayers heard by God, but destined to be buried with the petitioner. It was a time of unresolved injustice for both slave and young society.

Ironically, those times also saw freedom being preached from the pulpits, even while slaves suffered. A Christian revival swept the Colonies in the early and mid-1700s, known as The Great Awakening, leading people to a desire for self-government, free religious and secular expression, and economic autonomy. People experienced a new personal freedom in Christ, which would later, along with a second Great Awakening that lasted into the 1840s, eventually and inevitably lead to the understanding that freedom is the proper state of all people of any race and gender. Great movements of emancipation ensued. Freedom, once experienced, finds many applications.

So, there were other prayers lifted up to God. Those were prayers of thankfulness, for provision, for security in a new and raw land, and prayers of parents for their children's prosperity and their very souls. Those were prayers of a people who ascribed to Providence the blessings they received. God heard those prayers, yet many of those, too, were buried with the petitioner.

Years passed and turned into decades, and decades grew to be centuries, while God held those prayers in trust and the earth hardened over the past. Injustice and blessing, entwined and buried together, unresolved, forgotten by people, but not by God.

My thoughts drew back to the present day as the ceremony concluded in a prayer of gratitude and blessing. I thought how God chose this generation to witness the past breaking through the fallow ground, generations reaching out to us to make us hear them once again, and respond. I thought about injustice, and resolved in my heart to not let that happen in my generation, in any form. I thought about those people who are alive today who are the children of those whose prayers God never forgot, and wondered if He now plans to restore and bless them and us, according to the prayers still in His keeping.

As I left the gathering, a prayer welled up in own my heart. I asked God to forgive the injustice and release His blessing on us. May God hear our prayers and forgive our sin. May He now bring revival back to Portsmouth.

Jack Thorsen

Portsmouth

## **The African Burying Ground is a hallowed place**

Posted Jun. 2, 2015 at 2:01 AM

May 28—To the Editor:

The African Burying Ground

Thoughtful, somber, respectful, beautiful.

Portsmouth deserves much credit. An amazing discovery beneath her streets: the courage to stop excavation: the years of thoughtful planning on how best to honor those who lay there all these years.

The African Burying Ground Memorial Park is a hallowed place. The reburial ceremony was a beautiful tribute.

Thank you to all who worked so diligently to bring it to fruition.

**Ray and Irene Alie**

Hampton

# **I hope African Burying Ground inspires compassion, introspection**

Posted Jun. 11, 2015 at 2:01 AM

June 7 — To the Editor:

Today I visited for the first time the recently unveiled African Burying Ground in Portsmouth. The entire memorial is beautiful, soul-wrenching and such a long overdue honor to the unidentified people buried under Chestnut Street who worked to build Portsmouth while enslaved here. I became tearful as I read the excerpt from the 1779 petition for freedom, as I walked meditatively along the burial route where 200 silent lives waited two centuries for honor and as I stood shoulder to shoulder with the eight statues representing the individuals whose remains were discovered and re-interred. From the children's art work to the entrance sculpture of the man and woman whose hands will never touch, everything was beautiful- every pebble, every accent and every word. Except one: "Anger".

Our world doesn't need any more anger. I believe the justification to anger belongs to the individuals who are now free of their fate under Chestnut Street. From the rest of us, the world has a different need. I believe anger, bred of fear, is what leads to violence, including to the type of violence that dehumanized and enslaved our 200 citizens below the memorial. What we need, desperately in 2015, is not more anger, but compassion. Compassion heals, repairs and reconnects individual people, communities and our global human family. Anger only causes division, fear and more dehumanization.

While I was sitting by the burial vault, sketching the eight statues in their dignified repose, I watched people come and go. I especially noted their reactions: Some adults seemed uncomfortably upbeat, perhaps masking guilt; others were lost in serious solemnity. It was the children who came through with their parents who gave me hope. The children seemed concerned, solemn, yet free of anger and divisiveness. Instead, they seemed innocently hopeful and tender. For us to truly honor those who lay forgotten and dehumanized for over two centuries, let's respond from a place of empathy and compassion to those people who it may be hard to admit that we continue to forget and dehumanize: Children and adolescents, senior citizens, immigrants working low wage jobs, youth in the foster care system, people suffering behavioral and emotional challenges, people suffering intellectual and developmental disabilities, people suffering substance dependence, people suffering poverty or homelessness, people in the legal and correctional systems and people who we believe have wronged us or the world in some way. Let's stand with those eight nameless statues in making certain that no other human lives are symbolically thrown away and forgotten.

**Laurie A. Couture**

Newmarket