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Grant Spotlight: We Stand in Honor of Those Forgotten

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by *Victoria Hutter*



The City of Portsmouth used a performance by the Soweto Gospel Choir as an occasion for a candlelight procession to the site of the future memorial park, We Stand in Honor of Those Forgotten. Courtesy of ClearEye Photo

History has a way of insisting itself upon the present. Recently, construction crews digging up a parking lot in central London found what was later confirmed to be the remains of King Richard III. On the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, nine years earlier, infrastructure upgrades in downtown Portsmouth, New Hampshire, revealed a segregated burying place in use as early as 1705 for about 200 Africans and people of African descent, likely both enslaved and free.

Portsmouth businesses and residents embraced this unexpected appearance of history, choosing to close the street to through traffic and transform the block into a place of reverence, reflection, and learning. With plans for creating a park featuring public art and related programming, the city is well on its way to making a place that truly reflect its name, "[We stand in honor of those forgotten](#) ." The project has just received an NEA Art Works grant of \$20,000.

The NEA spoke with David Moore, community development director for the City of Portsmouth, Portsmouth City Councilor and African Burying Ground Committee member Chris Dwyer, and visual artist Jerome Meadows of

Meadowlark Studios who was commissioned to contribute the artwork for the project.

NEA: Let's start off with a status update. What is happening now and will be happening next?

DAVID MOORE: We have a completed design for the site that includes input from the community as well as our design team of Jerome and local landscape architect, Roberta Woodburn. We are in the process of raising the remaining funds with over \$720,000 raised to date toward our goal of \$1.2 million. We've seen tremendous momentum for the capital campaign and we are looking forward to breaking ground as soon as possible perhaps this fall.

DWYER: The fundraising is on track toward 2013, which marks the 10th anniversary of when the coffins were found.

NEA: Was it difficult to convince the city and businesses to close Chestnut Street to preserve the site and create the park?

DWYER: It actually wasn't that difficult. There was recognition that this was a burial ground, not an abstract site where something happened. What was more challenging was to figure out how to use the street. The terrific thing was the support of the abutters [businesses and residents whose properties are contiguous to the site]. Every single abutter has contributed financially to the project. That's very impressive because not only will the Memorial interrupt the traffic pattern but the abutters contributed and have stepped forward to help others raise dollars even placing temporary signage on the fronts of their buildings. They became participants in the project immediately.

NEA: Tell me about your community engagement process and how that developed—specifically the public forums that identified the ideas that Jerome Meadows would use to create the works?

MOORE: We have an incredibly engaged citizenry here in Portsmouth. We started with a great community conversation about what the site was. The next step was to determine how to honor and return the site to sacred ground. We used that question in two community forums. We had tremendous attendance, more than 100 people at each forum. We talked about what people envisioned for the site, what the site meant to them. That resulted in a series of themes and statements that we passed on to the artists from whom we asked for proposals to work with the city on this project.

MEADOWS: I have been and continue to be deeply honored to be the artist on this project. I had created a memorial to an African-American burial ground previously and so I had worked with a sacred site. Everyone on this committee held that sacredness front and center. For me, working on a project of this nature the first objective is to do a lot of listening, to hear from the committee as it represents the community and what makes this site sacred, beyond the obvious fact of it being a burial ground. So the relationship between me and the committee has been incredible and that's why we're going to end up with such a phenomenal memorial. That relationship has been sustained all of these years.

MOORE: And there's other fantastic support for the city's work. We have on the committee the leading historian of the African-American contributions to the city of Portsmouth, Valerie Cunningham. We have leaders, including our chair Vernis Jackson, from the [Seacoast African American Cultural Center](#) [which] has programs... that have kept people engaged in the project. These and other partnerships have been wonderful in maintaining attention, turning out supporters at key times, as well as helping to envision the programming that will keep this place rich after it's built.

NEA: How has and will the “artwork serve as a catalyst for cultural engagement” as was stated in your NEA grant application? What kind of programming will take place?

DWYER: Programming at this point has been hand-in-hand with fundraising. We did a series of small focus groups where we brought people in to talk about messaging and the issues we needed to be cognizant of as we moved forward. As a result, we've done a combination of education and fundraising. In addition to the pre-existing

[Portsmouth Black Heritage Trail](#) and African Cultural Center activities, we've added artistic programming. So when the Soweto Gospel Choir was here at our performing arts center, we organized a candlelight procession to the African Burying Ground with them, which encouraged our community to become aware and to help us toward our goal. We've done house parties. We just presented a play by Carlyle Brown about his return to Africa followed by another dramatic evening procession to the site, this time led by local clergy and chorus.

George Carlyle, who is one of our fundraising volunteers, said oftentimes people don't understand what the site really means initially, but once they go deeper and see the New England connection, why slaves were brought here as early as 1645, then you've got them hooked.

We also met early on with our local newspaper and gained their interest and support and they have provided tremendous in-depth coverage by addressing new angles to the story and keeping the public engaged. They assigned a terrific reporter, Deborah McDermott, and there just have been many, many articles.

In fact, *USA Today* just did a story on [a historic petition related to Portsmouth]. In 1779, 20 enslaved Portsmouth men petitioned the state legislature for their freedom because they had fought in the Revolutionary War. That petition was heard but not acted upon because it was not a "convenient time." At the community's urging this document is currently in front of our legislature to be heard all of these hundreds of years later.

MEADOWS: And the petition will be incorporated into the memorial via a memory line inscribed in granite. The memory line will connect two key sculptural components and a burial vault that will include the remains of the individuals exhumed in 2003. The Petition of 1779 is a story that speaks to the determination of enslaved people and the contributions they made in building Portsmouth from its earliest days.

Also, as part of the project, there will be in-school activities in the Portsmouth school system. Students will learn about the project and the history, and then contribute designs in the form of tiles that will be incorporated into the memorial itself.

MOORE: I want Jerome to speak to how he took the written input from the community forums and recast that information as the vision for the project, capturing that vision with the name, "We stand in honor of those forgotten."

MEADOWS: For me, the magic of art is to take words, emotions, history, legacy and think in terms of forms that tie the historical evidence with what the community is today. One of the things that I enjoy doing as a sculptor is not just thinking of specific artistic components but of the site overall. How do the elements fit within and flow through the landscape? So a visitor starts at one end where there's a realistic, life-sized sculpture in bronze of that first enslaved person and then at the other end there are more stylized figures representing the modern community of Portsmouth standing in witness to this history. Each of those carries one line of a poem that has become the language of the project.

NEA: Where did the poem come from?

MEADOWS: I wrote it. The poem was inspired by the input from these community meetings and was a way for me to create an outline from which the artistic elements emerged into the finished design.

DWYER: The poem has become such an important part of this whole project. There is a literariness to Jerome's work. He has a sense of text that resonates so strongly with our community, which is a very literary community. I've been involved in lots of public art projects and people always have trouble with things that aren't directly representational. The poem brought along people who otherwise wouldn't have grasped the visual aspect or seen how the pieces fit together to create the memorial

MEADOWS: I feel vindicated in a certain way because as a sculptor I've always been interested in using a variety of materials, styles, and processes. I used to get into, shall we say, heated conversations with my professors about this. Typically in the art world you're known for a certain style. But I pride myself and enjoy working in a range of

materials and that seemed completely applicable to this situation. So through the poem, my skills and my range of artistic vocabulary, we could visualize the story and sustain a meaningful dialogue. It's the antithesis of "Plop Art."

NEA: How do you think the park will serve the community?

DWYER: In a way the history of Portsmouth is the history of our country. We are planning for our 400th anniversary. We've seen a lot here. As I'm looking out of David's window here at the beautiful brick Federal buildings, I also think about the wealth of New England and how it was tied to slavery. This project has helped people begin to put historical realities together in ways that they never did before, even for people who thought they knew our history. The other aspect is that there is a lot of African-American and African history in Portsmouth outside of the site that will be highlighted by the site.

For example, up into the 1950s the resorts along the New England coast were segregated. But there was a black resort here called Rock Rest that's been preserved. We have places where free blacks, including George Washington's former slaves, set up shop. In 1645 up until 1713, we were the edge of the frontier with Indian country and yet there were already slaves here. It was well after the Civil War that the state of New Hampshire abolished slavery. So this project will help Portsmouth become a major destination for the history of our country.

NEA: Anything else to add?

MOORE: I've worked on this project for eight years and I am moved every time because the content that's covered here is so powerful. It is extraordinarily gratifying to see more and more people engage with the project over these years and it has taken many years. You couldn't have had a successful project in a two-year window. This is changing minds and perspectives and understanding, in addition to creating great art and a lasting place that will be focal point for important discussions in the future.

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Tags: ["We stand in honor of those forgotten"](#), [Chris Dwyer](#), [David Moore](#), [Jerome Meadoes](#), [NEA grant](#), [New Hampshire African burial ground](#), [Portsmouth African burial ground](#), [Portsmouth arts](#)

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