

AFRICAN BURYING GROUND



Valerie Cunningham and Kel Edwards sit at the New Hope Baptist Church where an overnight vigil watching over nine coffins will take place the night before the official opening of the African Burying Ground Memorial Park. PHOTO BY DEB CRAM/SEACOASTONLINE

'I'm here. *City's African ancestors to be honored and revered* Don't forget me.'

By Deborah McDermott | dmcdermott@seacoastonline.com

PORTSMOUTH — The souls of those who will be reburied at the African Burying Ground Memorial Park later this month were yearning to be found. Of that, Kelvin Edwards has no doubt.

"After being forgotten for such a long time, the souls were saying, 'I'm here. Don't forget me, please,'" said Edwards, president of the Seacoast African American Cultural Center. "I lived here. I worked here and I feel I should have more than the covering of concrete for

my existence."

Edwards is joining many in the Seacoast's descendent community in creating ritual and ceremony to honor the remains of 13 Africans who will be reburied with

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great dignity at the memorial park on Chestnut Street May 23. Few details have been left to chance, all facets are intended to bring closure to those who were buried and forgotten in the city's Negro Burying Ground hundreds of years ago.

"We're creating a ceremony that is authentic. Even though we don't know what culture these people are from, they are sons and daughters of the soil," said Oscar Mokeme of the Museum of African Art and Culture in Portland, a Nigerian chief who has been consulting with the burying ground committee and will lead the May 23 ceremony. "We say to them, 'May you go in peace to the land of your ancestors. We don't know why you chose to make yourself known, but you revealed yourself. We respect your wishes and have created a monument where you can rest in peace and where we can continue to celebrate your life.'"

The public events to honor the reburial of the Africans will begin Friday evening, May 22, with a night-long ancestral vigil at New Hope Baptist Church in Portsmouth, followed by a reburial ceremony at the site of the memorial park on May 23.

But arrangements for the reburial will actually begin several days before the ceremony, when 20 women elders from the Seacoast area will gather to prepare the remains. Mokeme said this is traditional in many West African countries, and in fact Edwards, who grew up in the South, remembers a similar tradition among his African American friends and family.

The remains, which have been in storage since they



Kel Edwards and Valerie Cunningham open the doors of the New Hope Baptist Church where an overnight vigil will be held May 22 over the coffins containing the remains of the city's earliest African-American residents, both free and slave, discovered during infrastructure improvement work on Chestnut Street in Portsmouth in October 2003. PHOTO BY DEB CRAM/SEACOASTONLINE

were first removed following routine utility work conducted by the city in 2003, will be prepared in a most symbolic and thoughtful way.

First, the caskets made by Portsmouth woodworker Jeff Cooper will be lined with shavings. In multi-layered symmetry, most of the shavings come from the early 18th century timbers used to build the Kittery Point house that in the 20th century became Rock Rest — an African-American guest house owned by Hazel and Clayton Sinclair.

When the timbers were removed by the current owner during reconstruction, Kittery Point resident Peter Lamb asked if he could have them and built a timberframe workshop. What he didn't use he is

hand-planing into shavings for the caskets.

"The symbolism is two-fold: it's physically connected to the spirit of what Rock Rest represented, and the timbers were trees that grew in this world around the same time the African Burying Ground was being used," Lamb said. "It's not impossible that they could have been hewed by indentured servants or enslaved people."

For Lamb himself, who traces both sides of his family tree to 17th century America, "it is probable that some branch of my own family owned slaves. So as I'm planing these timbers, I'm working on my own stories."

After the caskets are lined, the women will prepare the

remains using white linen — white for peace, "so we put them back into the earth with peace," said Mokeme. And they will tie the shrouds in red ribbon, which Mokeme said signifies "life and love, the symbol of mystery. We represent them in the land of the living while they represent us in the land of the dead."

Valerie Cunningham, the founder of the Portsmouth Black Heritage Trail and co-author of "Black Portsmouth," will be one of the women elders preparing the remains. She said she understands that the words "human remains" must be used because they are the most respectful the descendant community found.

"But they're very sterile words," she said. "So when we step back from that sterilized language, I am approaching them as people. It doesn't matter whether a full anatomical skeleton is there. It's a person who will be there and

who we will be interacting with."

She said as each woman elder was invited to participate in the preparation, "we could hear in their voices that they were almost overcome by the sense of responsibility and honor and reverence they were going to bring with them."

The prepared caskets will be taken by hearse and kept at J. Verne Wood Funeral Home until Friday evening, when they will be brought to New Hope Baptist Church. Edwards and Jerry Anne Boggis, director of the Portsmouth Black Heritage Trail, have put together what they hope will be a moving overnight vigil.

"Traditionally, relatives of the person who passed away would stand watch overnight all night long to help them pass on," said Boggis.

Services will be held at 7 p.m. — to honor and revere them; at midnight — to celebrate their lives; and at 6

a.m. — to send them in their way. Throughout the night, people are invited to sing, read a poem, play an instrument, or simply sit in silence.

On Saturday morning, the caskets will be taken by Farrell Funeral Home to a staging area, where they will be placed on horse-drawn caissons. The pallbearers, Mokeme, and memorial park creator Jerome Meadows will be among those who will walk behind the caissons to the park for the reburial ceremony, which begins at 8:30 a.m.

The caskets will be placed into a crypt — feet to the east, head to the west, as they were found, said Kathleen Wheeler of Independent Archaeological Consulting, the archaeologist who has been involved in the project since 2003. "It's an old Judeo-Christian tradition, so that when the messiah comes, you face Jerusalem. But I think they (the slave community) had their own subtle ways of resistance. The feet point to the east because that might be that's where our ancestors are — in Africa."

The ceremony crafted by Mokeme will use elements of earth — sand, for the beaches here and in Africa; dust, to remind us that we return to dust; and white clay, "a symbol of deep gratitude and peace," he said.

"It will be a celebration of gratitude that these spirits made themselves known to us, and to remind the children not yet born that the spirits of the ancestors are here," he said.

Vigil information

Those who would like to offer a song, poem, prayer or other contribution to the all-night vigil are asked to contact Jerry Anne Boggis at jaboggis@comcast.net, or Kelvin Edwards, keledw@comcast.net. Please send your name, phone number or email address, what tribute will be made, and the time you will be at the church.

For more information on the burying ground and for information on the activities planned, visit www.african-buryinggroundnh.org

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