

Major milestones



See a video on the African Burying Ground donation at www.seacoastonline.com.

Portsmouth High School's Black Student Union has raised a \$970 donation for the African Burying Ground project planned for Chestnut Street in Portsmouth. Pictured from left are Vernis Jackson, committee chairwoman; Valeria Agudelo, recent Portsmouth High School graduate; and Dr. Arthur Hilson, teacher and pastor. Those wishing to help the African Burying Ground Committee raise the remaining funds are asked to visit www.africanburyinggroundnh.org.

RICH BEAUCHESNE
PHOTO



■ Students' donation brings African Burying Ground fund closer to \$1.2M goal

BY DEBORAH MCDERMOTT
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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

"When I learned about the African burying ground, it was surprising. There were slaves in the South, of course. But it was a shock to think those things happened here."

Valeria Agudelo
Portsmouth High School
Black Student Union

Piscataqua Landscaping to build memorial park

BY DEBORAH MCDERMOTT
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PORTSMOUTH — An African Burying Ground Memorial Park to honor the city's slave ancestors is much 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

AFRICAN BURYING GROUND MEMORIAL PROJECT

DONATION: Students help cause

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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 utilities 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. The city just signed a contract to construct the park.

Agudelo said the Black Student Union raised the money for the burying ground one candy bar and school dance at a time. Since 2013, members have been selling candy, soft drinks and other snacks after school to students who had to stay for other commitments, such as sports, and needed

a little energy.

The group also held a “glow dance,” selling glow sticks to those who attended and again raising some money.

Agudelo said most of the members of the student union are not black. “They said, ‘Can I still join?’ We accept everyone. We’re not just black students doing this. We’re trying to help the community, too.”

Vernis Jackson, chairwoman of the African Burying Ground Committee, said she was “ecstatic” when she heard about the students’ donation. The committee is currently working to raise the final \$165,000 for the project, she said, so all donations at this point are gratefully accepted.

But she said it is particularly meaningful that the gift came from young people.

“I so believe in youth and the education of youth,” said Jackson, a retired Portsmouth teacher. “It’s important for young people to learn about the history of this community. To have this group take part in this project is just wonderful.”

“This donation means a lot to me, to the committee and to the city,” she said, “because it represents the youth.”

CONTRACT: Piscataqua Landscaping on board

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they were ready to go on the project. They were on target.”

The landscaping firm was among three finalists interviewed for the project, he said.

The project calls for a park and walkway to be constructed on Chestnut Street, the site where 13 bodies were uncovered during routine utility work in 2003. They are believed to be among more than 200 mostly enslaved Africans buried in that part of the city.

Central to the project is a granite wall that has a figure representing “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. “The designers put a lot of thought into dealing with just that,” he said.

What sold the selection committee on Piscataqua Landscaping was its “very impressive stone masonry work. It was top notch,” Allen said, which is important, as the project calls not just for a park but for artwork as well.

Now that a contract has been signed, the next few weeks will be focused on ordering materials, processing shop drawings, and putting together and finalizing a construction plan, Allen said.

During that time, a construction schedule will be refined. “We’re shooting for November,” Allen said, but added that date is predicated on timely delivery of supplies and materials such as custom-made granite and bluestone.

“You can’t just buy it. Someone has to cut it,” he said. “And some pieces

of this stonework have light fixtures recessed into them. So the schedule is completely driven by materials.”

Piscataqua Landscaping Vice President Justin Gamester said he is honored to have the company selected for this project.

“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.