Portsmouth — African Burying Ground

— Stephanie Seacord (www.africanburyinggroundnh.org), photographs by David J. Murray (ClearEyePhoto)

Located in downtown Portsmouth, the Portsmouth African Burying Ground opened on May 23, 2015, rededicating a site that may contain as many as 200 Africans, enslaved and free, in a city cemetery. Identified on city maps as early as 1705 and still in use in the early 1800s, the site had been paved over, built on, and largely overlooked except for inclusion in 1995 as a site on the Portsmouth Black Heritage Trail. In 2003, street excavation unearthed human remains. Subsequent forensic archaeology, including DNA testing, determined that the remains were of 13 individuals, all of African descent.

The new park includes a burial vault where the remains are re-interred, bronze statues representing Portsmouth's first enslaved person and Mother Africa, a fence with silhouettes of community members who "stand in honor of those forgotten," and ceramic tiles of West African adinkra symbols created by local schoolchildren. It also includes a ribbon of pink granite engraved with a quotation from a 1779 petition for emancipation made by 20 Africans enslaved in Portsmouth households; the petition was adopted by the New Hampshire Legislature in 2013. Although there are no records remaining of who is buried in the Portsmouth African Burying Ground, it is likely that some of the petition signers, and others who helped build colonial Portsmouth and served in the Revolutionary War army and navy alongside their masters, are there.

The Portsmouth African Burying Ground recalls the experience of slavery in New Hampshire and the long struggle of Africans who helped build the early colony into the third largest port in 18th century America. It is the only DNA-authenticated African cemetery of its kind in New England.

The creation of the new memorial sparked a community conversation. When fragments of wooden coffins and bone were disturbed in the 2003 street excavations, respectfully removed, and proven through forensic analysis to contain African DNA, the city began a series of “What’s next?” dialogues. City government formed an official Mayor’s Blue Ribbon African Burying Ground Committee, now chaired by the president of the Seacoast African American Cultural Center, with representatives from the local descendant community, including the founder of the Portsmouth Black Heritage Trail, city council members, archaeological professionals, and residents. Members of the community weighed in with thoughts and comments on the design for the agreed-upon Memorial Park, and a formal search began for designers. Design plans were selected from Jerome Meadows of Meadowlark Studios in Savannah, Georgia, and local landscape architect Roberta Woodburn to create the African Burying Ground Memorial Park, *We Stand in Honor of Those Forgotten*. Piscataqua Landscaping served as the general contractor.

The creation and dedication of the memorial depended on generating interest and support from many different entities. Community conversations and awareness building took many forms, from informal house parties, to formal presentations, public lectures, symposia and talks, concerts and performances. Events such as these aided with building the message of the importance of the memorial and supported the fund-raising efforts. The fund-raising goal of $1.2 million was met through appeals, through grant applications, donations from large foundations and individuals, and special events organized as reminders of the campaign.

Two days of commemorative events opened the Portsmouth African Burying Ground Memorial Park, including community-driven activities ranging from an ancestral vigil at New Hope Baptist Church, to the solemn Reburial, a celebration, and a Governor’s Proclamation.

This local accomplishment drew national attention because of the community dialogue that framed how Portsmouth came together to learn from its past to create an important lasting memorial.