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N.H. African Burial Ground Stirs Emotions

**By Beverley Wang
Associated Press**

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Discovery of African Burial Ground in New Hampshire Stirs Emotions.

PORTSMOUTH, N.H. - Amateur historian Valerie Cunningham was sure she knew what lay buried beneath Chestnut Street.

Forty years of combing through old documents for clues about this small seaport's black history told her what physical evidence did not that a few blocks from the trendy downtown shops, buried and all but forgotten below the brick and asphalt of Chestnut Street, lay the remains of Portsmouth's earliest black inhabitants, freed and enslaved.

"You can park on it, if you've got a quarter," said Cunningham, who co-authored "Black Portsmouth: Three Centuries of African-American Heritage" with Mark Sammons.

The evidence included 19th century newspaper clippings that said workmen laying pipe had "disturbed numerous remains of negroes" and a map in Charles Brewster's "Rambles about Portsmouth," published in 1859. The map showed the "Negro Burial Ground" at the foot of Chestnut Street, then Prison Lane, in 1705.

Six years ago, the nonprofit Portsmouth Black Heritage Trail, of which Cunningham is president, placed a marker near the site. But the location was too imprecise to justify tearing up the street. Without burial records, the search for more information stalled.

Then, on Oct. 7, 2003, contractors repairing a sewer line hit a pine coffin. Cunningham got the news at work at the University of New Hampshire.

"I don't even have the words to describe it, I could not believe it," she recalls.

In the following days archaeologists identified 13 sets of remains, removing eight that were damaged by sewer runoff. Some of the coffins were stacked, leading researchers to estimate that as many as 200 bodies could be buried in the block-long space.

Further testing confirmed their African heritage; forensic analyses revealed they endured heavy labor and died young.

"There isn't any one bit of information that says, 'OK, this is definitely a slave.' But putting it all together, it kind of gives us really strong evidence that it couldn't be anything but that," said Ellen Marlatt, a senior researcher with Independent Archaeological Consulting LLC, which excavated and studied the remains.

New Englanders typically owned fewer slaves per family than in the South, and dead slaves usually were buried in unmarked graves on their owners' property. Over time, nearly all the sites disappeared. (One local exception is on land now owned by Christ Episcopal Church.)

Marlatt said that is why Chestnut Street is so important.

"This is the only example of an 18th-century African burial ground, like a centrally located African burial ground, in New England," she said.

Two larger burial grounds for slaves and free blacks also were discovered by construction workers in recent years. One found in New York City in 1991 was recently made a national monument. In Brazil, efforts are under way to preserve a huge burial ground discovered in Rio de Janeiro in the mid-1990s.

The Portsmouth discovery raises many unanswered questions. Aside from the coffins and a single shroud pin, no artifacts have been found. Researchers say the chances of locating any living relatives are slim. They also were unable to determine how anyone died.

The discovery has been an uncomfortable reminder not only of slavery in Portsmouth, but of more recent racism, or at least callousness. The excavations showed the 19th century workmen not only "disturbed" the graves, but punched pipes through at least two coffins.

Cunningham said race may not have been the reason, or the only reason.

"People now refer to it as a shameful event that the cemetery, the burial ground, was lost all these years. It was unmarked and unknown and it had been built over," she said. "We know that it happened all the time. Not only to black people but to any poor people during the period."

Histories show that slaves were bought and sold throughout the 1700s at Portsmouth's taverns and docks. Captured Africans were brought to Portsmouth by sea captains with names now associated with historic events, buildings and even a town names such as Rindge, Odiorne, Morse and Wentworth.

By 1773, records show there were 674 slaves in New Hampshire. The largest group, 160, was in Portsmouth.

"One of the results of this discovery and the investigation and so forth is to bring to the forefront issues of slavery in New Hampshire. It was here, it was real, and it's a reminder

to us," said Richard Boisvert, state archaeologist. "I think at a certain point in time people were happy to forget that it existed, because they were frankly embarrassed by it."

Now that it's been rediscovered, this burial ground won't be forgotten again. Plans are not final yet, but the city intends to close Chestnut Street to traffic and create a memorial park there.

"We wanted to do something to make amends for the oversight of those people 250 to 300 years ago, who left us with an unresolved reputation for having been a slave-trading city, having used slaves and buried them without any burial stones or any respect to some degree," said City Councilor John Hynes, chairman of a committee planning the memorial.