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Newport holds one of the oldest slave cemeteries

By ELIZABETH ZUCKERMAN, Associated Press

NEWPORT, R.I. – Dotted the landscape of the Common Burying Ground are the graves of those who helped build colonial Newport: African slaves and their descendents.



The 282 gravestones, most dating to the 18th century, form a collection some historians call unparalleled and provide a window into the work, faith and families of the period.

For Keith Stokes, executive director of the Newport County Chamber of Commerce, the head and footstones are also a reminder that Americans of African descent have deep roots in the United States and in the history of Newport, a summer resort and sailing community best known for its Gilded-era mansions.

“We have African-American children in this community that don’t feel that they belong here, and I’ve got to stop them and say, ‘Hey, hold on, your people have been here for centuries,’” said Stokes, who is Black and has Jewish ancestors who lived in Newport centuries ago.

Historians say the Newport burying ground, which came to be known as “God’s Little Acre,” stands out for its size and for how well it has been preserved.

It’s among the oldest known African burial grounds in the country, and also contains what may be the first African artwork in the New World: headstones carved by Zingo Stevens, a slave, later freed, who worked in the stone shop of John Stevens Jr.

Zingo Stevens carved headstones including those of his first, second and third wives. The cherubs on several of the stones have curly hair, and distinctly African features, a pattern repeated throughout the cemetery.

A number of the stones also bear African names, including some that link the dead to particular West African tribes.

Stokes points to the recurrence of the name Cuffe, an Anglicization of Kofi, a traditional name for Ghanaian boys born on Fridays. The name Cudjo or Kojo also appears, a name given to Thursday-born boys. Stokes and Jim Garman, a professor of historic preservation at Salve Regina University in Newport, said the slaves’ retention of their African names is extremely unusual and points to unique

aspects of slavery as it played out in Newport and its surroundings.

“Here, there is more of an open celebration, or at least toleration, of African culture and history,” Stokes said.

That, Stokes and Garman said, was due to factors including Newport’s relatively urban economy. Rather than being agricultural workers, Newport’s slaves were often skilled and educated trades and craftsmen.

Additionally, while Rhode Island was deeply involved in the slave trade, making it home to more slaves than any of the other Northeast colonies during the colonial period, it was also home to Quakers and other religious minorities who came to spearhead the abolitionist movement.

Those factors, plus the involvement of slaves in Newport religious communities and the tendency for slave owners and their slaves to share the same homes, led to a greater status for slaves and free Africans in Rhode Island as compared with their counterparts in the South or the Caribbean.

That higher status helps explain why slave owners sometimes paid for highly detailed headstones to mark the passing of the Africans they owned. It also accounts for the relative lack of segregation in the Common Burying Ground, in which the African graves are clustered together, but the graves of some Europeans can be found among them.

The attitudes toward the African slaves in Newport also helped foster a sizable community of free Blacks during the Colonial era, Stokes said. Their headstones, he said, reflect what was often substantial success in business and other areas, with carvings as ornate and inscriptions as reverent as those of their white peers.

Among those memorialized are Pompey Brenton, once a cook for the Brenton family, who went on as a freed slave to become a caterer and public leader, and Duchess Quamino, who bought her freedom and was known for her baking as the “Pastry Queen of Rhode Island.”

By 1784, Rhode Island began to abolish slavery. The burial ground continued to be used by free Blacks, but many people of all races left Newport after the Revolutionary War because the British occupation had devastated the city’s economy.

Stokes said one of his hopes is to find some of the descendents of those buried in God’s Little Acre, and Garman hopes to begin work at the site, possibly using ground-penetrating radar to locate unmarked gravesites and fallen stones.

Stokes is also hoping to raise money for preserving the site, restoring some of the stones and creating educational programs around the cemetery. “I want to be able to say that these people were absolutely remarkable people despite that fact that they came here as forced immigrants,” Stokes said.