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God's Little Acre

By Brian Conforti

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Duchess Quamrino was a slave in the William Channing household in Newport in the 18th century. She was well-known as a baker and was called "the pastry queen of Rhode Island." She was freed later in her life and continued to bake her pastries and cakes in the kitchen of the Channing home. Her husband John Quamrino became the first African American to attend Princeton University in 1777.

In 1864, at the age of 65 she passed away and was buried in the Common Burial Ground. Her barely legible headstone reads in part: "In memory of Duchess Quamrino, a free black of distinguished excellence: intelligent, industrious, affectionate, honest and of exemplary piety."

This headstone is one of several hundred from the 17th and 18th century in a portion of the Common Burial Ground called "God's Little Acre," a section that borders Forewell Street and is thought to be one of the oldest and largest African and early African-American burying grounds in the country. It was very

rare for slaves and free blacks to have gravestones back then, yet many did. Though some stones have felt the ravages of time, an unprecedented number of early headstones remain, and each one is a material, albeit scattered, of the life that it marks.

"This burial ground represents the African men, women and children who were the servants and craftspeople of colonial Newport," said Keith Stokes, who with his wife Theresa has done extensive research into God's Little Acre and has produced a website, www.colonial-century.com, detailing the lives of many of the slaves and free blacks whose headstones remain here.

"These are the last physical records of the men and women who lived here," he continued. "I don't think people realize how significant the Common Burial Ground is."

Sabie Hagins University professor Jim Gorman does. A little more than a decade ago he helped galvanize a successful effort to start preserving the burial ground as a whole, and in recent months one of his classes has helped inventory and document all the gravestones in God's Little Acre.

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DAN HUNT

Keith Stokes shows visitors around God's Little Acre, home to nearly 300 17th and 18th century gravestones of African and African Americans. Below are some examples of the stones in the cemetery, which is in the Common Burial Ground on Forewell Street.



cover story

Preserving God's Little Acre

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"What makes this such an incredible resource is there's nothing like it anywhere, to my knowledge," said Gorman, who is the department head of Sabes's cultural and historic preservation program. He mentioned that a large early African burial ground was uncovered in New York City. It had one unmarked headstone. God's Little Acre has close to 300—sometimes very detailed grave markers.

"These are people who left few primary records of their own," Gorman continued. "This is what we have, this is the material evidence we have of these people."

The story that these headstones tell is one that has largely escaped history books until recently. In 1896, the first documented slave ship, the *Sea Flower*, arrived in Newport. Newport grew into one of the most significant and prosperous colonial seaports, largely due to its role in the Triangle Trade, which, in a nutshell, saw ships travel to Africa to get slaves, who were brought to the West Indies and traded for sugar and molasses, which was taken to America to be turned into rum, which was used to buy slaves in Africa. Most histories focus on Newport's role in the manufacture of rum and the building and captaining of the ships used in the trade.

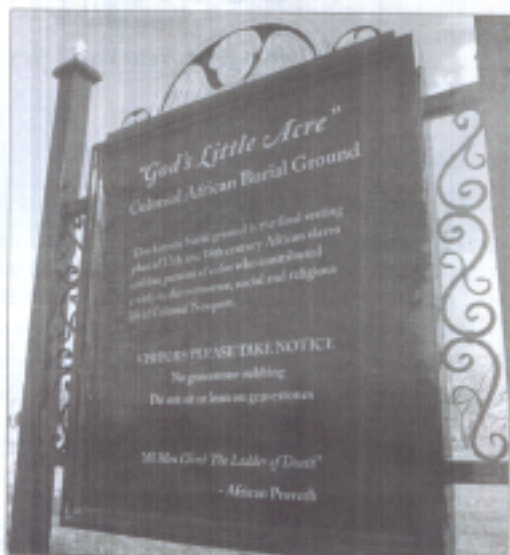
But slaves weren't only brought to the plantations of the South and the Caribbean. At its height as a colonial seaport before the American Revolution, some estimates say nearly a third of Newport's population was black, largely enslaved. As most of the markers in God's Little Acre will attest, the slaves were somewhat misleadingly referred to as "servants," which likely was a way for people who were lured to Newport and America as a whole with the idea of religious freedom and tolerance to deal with the commodification slavery presented.

And in many ways, evidenced by the fact that these slaves were purchased headstones by their masters and by some of the warm epithets provided by white preachers and masters on these stones, the relationships between blacks and whites was a somewhat closer one than the traditional notion of slaves in the field in the South. Indeed, the slaves often slept in the same house as the masters here in Newport.

But, of course, they were still slaves and Stokes and others quickly point out that the "benevolent masters" were certain to mention on the headstones that the slaves were their property. Slaves were given the last name of their masters, and a walk through God's Little Acre reveals that the slave headstones reflect the names of Newport's most prominent early families: Brown, Flagg, Lopez, Redwood, Cranston, Illery, Beeton.

"We could say that maybe slavery wasn't so bad here," said Gorman. "But I think if we were to do that we'd be buying into 200 years of revisionist history."

Stokes is also quick to point out that the reason he thinks it's important to preserve God's Little Acre is to help illustrate to people today what a vital role these African slaves and free African Americans played in early Newport society and economy.



This sign, hand-made by Rich Madden, was recently installed to mark the historic God's Little Acre cemetery in the Coleson Burial Ground.

Slaves and free blacks worked in the homes of wealthy white merchants, but they also worked in their shops, where they learned trades like ropemaking, construction and stone cutting. Slave and free black labor played a significant role in the construction of the Colony House and the Brick Market, among dozens of other buildings and homes.

Prince Updike, whose headstone lies in God's Little Acre, was a slave of prosperous merchant Aaron Lopez. Lopez's ships, in addition to molasses, also brought coconuts and sugar into town. Updike would take the coconuts and sugar and turn it into chocolate, becoming known as a master chocolate grinder. Porpey Stevens, who changed his name back to his African name Zingo after being freed, worked in the venerable John Stevens Shop (a shop that exists today, under the same name), where he learned to carve gravestones. Many of his customers dot God's Little Acre, including three he carved for the three wives he outlived and a loving testament to his brother. He signed his headstones, and as gravestones are often considered the first form of African folk art, Zingo Stevens may be the first African American artist.

"These weren't beasts of the field," Stokes said. "They were masters in their own right."

"The stories add so much more depth than just master and slave. We are now talking about how colonial Newport operated."

The first step toward preserving this legacy is recognizing it. God's Little Acre is a tangible collection of artifacts, each of which tells part of the story of colonial Newport. Stokes, who is also the executive director of the Newport County Chamber of Commerce, lead an effort to raise money from the Newport County Fund of the Rhode Island Foundation and the General Assembly to build a sign marking the historic cemetery. Gorman and Stokes are hopeful that the increased attention paid to the cemetery will help keep vandals out as well as those who find in the dark corners of the cemetery a place to

drink and take drugs.

Rich Madden of Zoben Signs built the sign out of mahogany, oak and steel. The top of the sign features a hand-carved replication of the top of the headstone of five-year-old Solomon Nuba Tikoy, originally carved by John Stevens II. Tikoy's stone was chosen in part because the carving, like many others in the cemetery, features a cherub with distinctly African features. Stokes said when his children were younger they were cleaning up the cemetery when his oldest daughter, 12 at the time, remarked on how the carving on a grave stone looked like her. It was something of a revelation, because the historical pictures she was used to seeing were those of white people like George and Martha Washington. The stone gave her a connection to history she hadn't felt before, Stokes said.

"The black community in 1780 was more prosperous and more integrated than today," Stokes said. "It's a terrible irony."

But in recognizing the cemetery, Stokes hopes that people will also be inspired to recognize the contributions Africans and African-Americans made in the creation of Newport's rich history.

In addition to documenting and inventorying all the headstones and reassembling the people those stones mark, Gorman's class will also come up with a plan for the physical preservation of the headstones. The conditions of the headstones vary wildly as time and nature take their toll on the slate stones. Many need to be re-set and a maintenance plan needs to be formed for the overall upkeep of the cemetery. Gorman's class will come up with a detailed preservation plan, which it will present sometime in January, for the stones in God's Little Acre.

It is a fragile place and visitors are asked not to lean on stones and to be careful when walking in the area. Stokes currently leads tours of the cemetery and hopes to have more in the future.

"We're not going to be calling it African history," Stokes said. "This is Newport history."

DAN HUNT