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New Sign Marks Newport's Slave Cemetery

Story by Meghan Hogan / Dec. 22, 2004

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One of the oldest slave cemeteries in the country, located in Newport, R.I., is finally getting the recognition it deserves.

On Dec. 17, about 50 people, including Newport Mayor Richard Sardella, gathered to watch as the unveiling of a 10-foot-tall commemorative sign for the site, known as "God's Little Acre." The burial ground, part of a cemetery called the Common Burying Ground, is one of the oldest slave cemeteries in the country, dating back to 1712.

"There's been a lot of recovery and restoration of that portion of the cemetery, but the sign is the next level of preservation by giving the burial grounds a physical sense of identity," says Keith Stokes, executive director of the Newport County Chamber of Commerce.

The \$2,000 wood sign, which the Rhode Island Foundation funded, is not just a historical marker but a representation of the African-American slaves and the industries they supported. Carved into the sign is a replica of the grave of a five-year-old boy slave and a pineapple, traditionally a sign of hospitality but also an icon of slavery.



The new marker was unveiled on Dec. 17. (Ken Stokes)

"We tried to create a sign that would show that even children were enslaved," Stokes says. "Some of our everyday products, like pineapples, were originally harvested from the African-American slave labor."

Many people don't associate slavery with New England, but the region had a thriving slave force until it was outlawed in the late 1700s. Rhode Island banned slavery in 1784. Slaves in New England were treated considerably better than those in the South, and the surviving graves at God's Little Acre are somewhat a reflection of better treatment.

Stokes hopes the new sign will convince more of Newport's 3.5 million tourists to visit the burial ground and its 282 gravestones.

"The markers are very ornate and detailed," he says. "Even the cherubs and angels are carved with African features."

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