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Burial ground reveals the story of Africans in Newport



"God's Little Acre." burial ground tells the stories of Newport's Colonial Africans, such as 13-year-old Dinah Pompey Gardner, whose headstone, above, was carved by John Stevens in 1782.

A HISTORY SET IN STONE

BY RICHARD SALIT
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NEWPORT — Except for the sounds of traffic on aptly named Farewell Street, the old cemetery is silent.

But now its story is finally being told.

Here, in long-neglected Common Burying Ground, brush and broken glass have been cleared from a group of gravesites, revealing headstones bearing African names such as Quamino and Cudjo and images of angels with distinctly African features.

They are the names of the first slaves brought to Colonial Newport — a dominant player in the slave

SEE **GROUND, A10**



Victoria Johnson of Portsmouth, Newport Mayor Richard Sardella and Ruth Thumbzen of Newport attend the unveiling yesterday of the new sign.

JOURNAL PHOTOS /
FRIEDA SQUIRES

Ground

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trade and they were the first to win freedom for themselves and their families. There's Prince Updear, a master chocolate maker who died in 1781, and Arthur Flagg, a rope maker who, after winning his freedom, reverted to his African name Tiley.

"This section of the burial ground contains some of the nation's largest and oldest burial markers, in their original state, of African slaves and free persons," historian Keith Stokes said yesterday during an unveiling of the first sign commemorating the cemetery's historic significance. "I would argue you won't find anything like this in the Americas or the West Indies."

"Also, what's exciting is that this burial ground contains markers with some of the most descriptive information of Africans — in terms of their names, their heritage, their place of origin in Africa and how they arrived here."

THE COLLECTION of nearly 285 grave markers, Stokes said, illustrates the contribution of Africans to Newport, not as cotton-picking, tobacco-harvesting "beasts of the field," but as skilled rope makers, barrel makers and rum distillers.

And the care with which the markers were made and inscribed demonstrates how slaves in Newport, having lived in the same quarters as their owners, developed closer ties with their masters than did their counterparts on sprawling Southern plantations.

"As we recognize that Newport has some of the most historic Gilded Age and Colonial properties in America, we also have to recognize that many of the men, women and children who built those houses and serviced those homes were the people in this cemetery," Stokes said. "So as we cherish those historic buildings, this is an opportunity to cherish the memory of a historic people who built and supported those buildings."

About two dozen people — including local officials, statewide



preservationists and leaders of the state's black community — gathered yesterday for the unveiling of the somber and historical looking cemetery sign.

Black, wooden and 10 feet tall, it stands prominently at the cemetery gates, proclaiming the burial ground as "God's Little Acre." That's what generations of local black families have called it, even if they didn't fully appreciate the history that has been smoothed by Stokes, his wife,



Thomas Guzman Stokes, and other researchers.

At the top of the sign, created by Richard Madden, of Middletown's Zebra Sign and Design, is a wooden carving of a child-like African angel, one with curly hair and a flat nose. It's a replica of the image stonemason John

Stevens carved into the grave marker of 5-year-old Solomon Nahn Tiley, the son of Arthur Tiley.

"I wanted to show the image of a child. Slavery and enslavement was particularly insidious for children," said Stokes. They could be "assimilated into the household much more readily than if you had an 18- or 20-year-old or an adult. So children were very much a part of the slave trade."

The sign reads, "This historic burial ground is the final resting place of 17th and 18th century African slaves and free persons of color who contributed greatly to the commerce, social and religious life of Colonial Newport."

It is followed by an African proverb: "All men climb the ladder of death."

Said Stokes, "We wanted it to be as much a work of art as a sign."

It cost about \$2,000 and was paid for by grants from the General Assembly and the Newport County Fund of the Rhode Island Foundation.

NOT SURPRISINGLY in a cemetery more than two centuries old, many of the slate headstones are split, precariously tipping over and fading to the point where their inscriptions can be read only in just the right light. But many of the grave markers in Common Burying Ground have survived the thoughtlessness of vandals, the indifference of time and the neglect of its owners.

The city, said Stokes, has made a commendable effort in recent years to cut the grass, clear debris and have the police watch out for vandals and vagrants. Meanwhile, historians such as himself and James Gurnon, a Salus Rogers University professor, have been studying the grave markers and striving to preserve them.

Stokes, the executive director of the Newport County Chamber of Commerce, said the work has paid off by providing an invaluable opportunity to tell the real story of slaves and free men in Rhode Island, even if some people consider such an effort unnecessarily painful.

"It's hard for people still," said

Bill Harvey, of Middletown, Jo Gaines, of Newport, and historian Keith Stokes look at some of the tombstones in the Common Burial Ground. The graves, such as that of Violet Thurston, far left, who died in 1783, tell the story of Africans who came to Newport as slaves.

JOURNAL PHOTOS/
FRIDA SQUARES

Stokes. "Newport was so closely tied to the slave trade, I don't see that as a negative at all. I think that's a wonderful, fabulous story about how this community was built and how America was built."

Besides, he said, no one religious, ethnic or geographic group can be held solely responsible for slavery. Even Africans helped enslave fellow Africans.

"Who was involved in the slave trade?" he said. "Everyone was involved. Everyone profited."

Stokes said that getting the money for the sign and attracting the crowd that gathered yesterday never would have happened before a recent trend in heritage tourism and an increasing recognition of the role that ethnic minorities played in the nation's history.

"NOBODY VALUED this part of American history 20 to 30 years ago," he said.

Now he finds people willing to follow him around the cemetery listening to stories about the people buried there, just as he did with the locals who turned out yesterday on a raw morning or the church members from New York City who took a tour on a scorching day last summer.

For these groups, he strolls the cemetery, reading aloud inscriptions and talking about the people buried there as if they were friends or family (some actually are, including his father, Archie, who served in World War II).

"This one here, which is probably one of the most descriptive and most complete, is of Pompey Brenton," he said. "Pompey Brenton is a slave in the Gov. William Brenton household. He becomes a free person. He is a caterer by training. . . . When he becomes free, he [opens] a catering business and becomes a quite wealthy free African."

"If you notice, the image on the marker, it has very clear African features. This is a very important marker from the sense that it not only conveys that this African lived and eventually died, but it conveys that during this time, the community embraced and openly allowed for this level of inscription."

"Not everyone looked like George and Martha Washington," he joked.

Stokes never seems to lose his enthusiasm for God's Little Acre, for which he and his wife have created a detailed Web site (www.colonialcemetery.com).

"This is a treasure trove of real understanding not only early Africans and Africans in America," he said, "but really understanding Colonial commerce, Colonial history and how people interacted during that time."

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