

**MINUTES
BLUE RIBBON COMMITTEE ON
AFRICAN BURIAL GROUND
(CHESTNUT STREET)**

Wednesday, April 18, 2007
at 4:30 p.m.
held in the
Law Library, City Hall

Meeting commenced at 4:30 p.m.

Members in attendance were: Councilor John W. Hynes - Chair, Councilor Laura Pantelakos, Vernis Jackson, Mary Bailey, Valerie Cunningham, and Jack McGee.

[Public Works Director Steve Parkinson, and Suzanne M. Woodland (Ex-officio members)]

Also attending were Deputy City Manager Cindy Hayden and David Moore of the Community Development Department.

Consultants attending were Roberta Woodburn and Wendy Anderson of Woodburn & Company and members of her team Jerri Anne Boggis and Jonathon Ring.

Also attending were Ellen Marlatt and Kathleen Wheeler of Independent Archeological Consultants; and Sue Cobbler from Art Speak.

The Committee approved the minutes of the meetings held on January 16, 2007 and February 13, 2007.

Chairman John Hynes advised that Mr. Splaine had resigned from the Committee.

David Moore briefly reviewed the process by which the City engaged the landscaping design consultant. The City has engaged Woodburn & Company for the design and engineering services for the site. Robbie Woodburn principal of Woodburn & Company then introduced her team. She indicated that the survey for the Chestnut Street site is underway and that her firm is reviewing the history of the site and archeological findings in preparation for the May 5, 2007 public design forum. The team has also met with IAC.

The Committee then reviewed the draft agenda for the May 5, 2007 public design forum. The design forum will be held May 5, 2007 in the Levenson Room at the new Library. The program will begin promptly at 9:00 a.m.; registration will begin at 8:30 a.m. and refreshments will be available. The first portion of the program will bring participants up-to-date with regard to the discovery of the remains at Chestnut Street and their significance. It will also serve as an introduction to the history of Africans and African Americans in Portsmouth. The presentation section will also provide information on existing site conditions. Thereafter, the participants in the program will be divided into small groups so that design ideas can be generated by facilitators working with each group.

Robbie Woodburn described the consultants' role as facilitating the expression of the community's interest, feelings, thoughts and ideas regarding the discovery of the site.

David Moore identified the groups that he has already contacted with regard to the design forum on May 5th. Distribution was made to Seacoast African American Cultural Center, UNH Black Heritage Partnership, Portsmouth Black Heritage Trail, Vo-Techs, Portsmouth High School (Dr. Hilson), Ports. Athenaeum, Ports City Wide Neighborhood Committee, Art Speak, Portsmouth City Council, Abutters, State Agencies and Newspapers. Committee members suggested some additional groups/organizations including the New Hope Church, the Middle Street Baptist Church and the Emmanuel Church of Christ on Bartlett Street.

There was discussion arising from a question posed by Councilor Pantelakos regarding the role of the state archeologist. David Moore and other members of the staff advised that the state would have a continuing role and that the state archeologist was looking for input from the Committee with regard to re-interment at the site.

Staff indicated that the presentation on May 5th will be videotaped.

A question was raised by Jack McGee regarding the Committee's participation on May 5th. He indicated that his preference was that the Committee members not participate in the facilitated groups and that they remain observers as ideas, thoughts and concepts are generated by community members. After some discussion, the Committee determined that they would hold their next meeting on May 9th at 4:30 p.m. to share their impressions from the May 5th forum with Robbie Woodburn and to share any of their own ideas with regard to the theme, design and purpose of the site improvements.

The Committee next discussed re-interment of the remains. Jack McGee indicated that his preference would be that each set of remains have a distinct burial space. He was not in favor of a common container for all of the remains.

Kathy Wheeler of Independent Archeological Consulting indicated that there was probably sufficient space on the site for remains to be returned individually in separate containers. Of the eight (8) remains removed from the site, seven (7) reflected a traditional burial with feet placed to the east and the head to the west. One set of remains was buried with feet placed to the west and head to the east. One question that needs to be answered is whether each set of remains will have individual containers. In some cases, the remains include only dental and bone fragments which can fit in the palm of a hand.

Kathy Wheeler noted that there was one adult and one juvenile who were located in individual coffins but stacked on top of each other. There was a suggestion that they may have been family members and thus intentionally placed that way.

There was also a discussion with regard to Kathy Wheeler's recent presentation to the City Year group regarding the African Burial Ground site. The presentation was apparently well-received and there was discussion of Kathy Wheeler's ability to recreate that presentation in another forum with an invitation sent to members of the Committee and other interested

persons. After the meeting it was determined that more time would be provided to Dr. Wheeler to give her full presentation of the May 5th forum.

There was also a brief discussion regarding pictures of the bones removed from the site. Kathy Wheeler indicated that some of the bones do help tell a story with regard to the lives that these individuals led. Although there may be some sensitivity in terms of showing pictures of the actual remains, the pictures may be of value to the community for those wishing to understand life during that period.

Councilor Pantelakos indicated that her preference was that the individuals be re-interred separately in the same manner in which they were found to the extent possible.

Councilor Hynes indicated that he wanted the community to do justice to these individuals as part of the re-interment.

Mary Bailey also indicated her preference for separate containers with small sized containers as may be appropriate or necessary.

Ellen Marlatt raised the issue of what to do with the wooden coffins. The Committee should decide whether they want the remnants of the original wooden coffins to be re-interred as part of this process. It will be important for the designers to know whether the coffin remnant will be re-interred with the human remains, because that will impact the volume of space needed as part of the re-interment process.

Vernis Jackson indicated her preference for separate burial containers and that the coffin wood should be included in the containers and part of the re-interment.

JerriAnne Boggis asked whether the coffin wood could be reused to create new containers. Kathy Wheeler indicated that she did not think that the coffin wood was in good enough condition for reuse. However, it might be possible to use some of the pieces as an inlay.

There was further discussion between staff and the Independent Archeological Consultants regarding the development of some possible dimensions for the containers based on the assumption that the containers would hold not only the human remains but the remnants of the original coffins. With dimensions for containers determined, the consultants would review the volume of the space required for re-interment and the potential layout.

Valerie Cunningham requested an update with regard to the scope of work for Woodburn & Company. Staff indicated that they would provide a copy of the scope of work which is part of the contract with Woodburn & Associates to Committee members.

Valerie Cunningham asked what type of wood was used for the coffins. Kathy Wheeler indicated that it was eastern white pine which was standard at that time. There was discussion that as part of the New York City African Burial site re-interment boxes for the remains were carved using native African woods.

There was a discussion as to whether a vault should be constructed to contain the remains in their separate containers. Two reasons for using a vault surfaced: to ensure no future

disturbance; and to protect the remains for future study when testing methods are improved. The alternative is to place the containers directly in the ground as that would be returning them to the condition in which they were removed.

There was also a brief discussion as to whether the re-interment needed to take place under the ground or whether an above ground vault memorial could be used. Kathy Wheeler opined that culturally in Africa the preference is to inter underground.

Others indicated that there is precedent for interment above grade. Robbie Woodburn indicated that it may be possible to raise the grade at the end of Chestnut Street.

There was a question with regard to the schedule of work. Staff responded that there is no final date for completion of construction, but there is a schedule for the completion of the consultants work.

Valerie Cunningham mentioned that in January 2008 she will be participating in a trip to Ghana. During that trip perhaps it would be possible to speak with local craftsmen with regard to possibly obtaining receptacles for the remains.

There was also a brief discussion with regard to fundraising and some interest in beginning that process sooner rather than later. Sue Cobbler, Art Speak Coordinator, indicated that there may be grant funds available to assist with some of the elements of this project.

Motion to adjourn at 5:55 p.m. which was seconded and all concurred.

Submitted by: Assistant City Attorney Suzanne Woodland