



**DRAFT**

## **AFRICAN BURYING GROUND STEWARDSHIP COMMITTEE**

**Wednesday April 14 2021 2:00 p.m.  
Meeting by Remote Zoom Conference**

Members Present by Zoom: Vernis Jackson, Valerie Cunningham, Dr. Jan Nisbet, Ron Baisden

Ex-Officio Members Present: JerriAnne Boggis, Dr. Kathleen Wheeler

Staff Present: Suzanne M. Woodland, Deputy City Attorney  
Stephanie Secord, Public Information Officer

Guests: Dr. Blair Zaid, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Chair Suzanne Woodland opened the meeting and read the following statement:

Per NH RSA 91-A:2, III (b) the Chair has declared the COVID-19 outbreak an emergency and has waived the requirement that a quorum be physically present at the meeting pursuant to the Governor's Executive Order 2020-04, Section 8, as extended by Executive Order 2021-01, and Emergency Order #12, Section 3. Members will be participating remotely and will identify their location and any person present with them at that location. All votes will be by roll call.

1. Acceptance of draft minutes of March 10, 2021 meeting.

Ms. Jackson moved to accept the meeting minutes of March 10, 2021. Seconded by Mr. Baisden. All concurred.

2. Potential Black Scholars to assist Committee.

Discussion began by trying to identify 3-4 key questions that the committee has currently (these may change). These key questions could be posed to Black Scholars willing to assist the committee in the evaluation of opportunities.

Brief review of the research options that were discussed at the last meetings and what could be learned.

Conversation around DNA analysis. Expression of concern about ramifications of building family trees.

Types of questions: If we authorize DNA analysis, what does that mean for Portsmouth and community at large? What does it mean if we do the DNA analysis, but don't do genealogy? What are implications on making the data available; do we make it public or private?

At 10:22 Dr. Zaid from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln who holds a PhD in Black Studies and African Studies joined the meeting. She has worked with Dr. Amy Michael on different projects. She expressed her interest in hearing what the committee's needs are and of being of assistance.

In response to a question regarding comparative studies/historical archaeology of Black sites, Dr. Zaid explained that such sites represent a community, not just a burial ground, and that helps provide a wider range of ways to look at the questions that might be asked and answered.

Dr. Zaid was asked about her experience and perspective on DNA analysis. Dr. Zaid has not had much experience with DNA analysis, but did offer some helpful perspective. She shared that ancestry is difficult to do with DNA alone and there was a discussion of other elements that can be examined to understand African ancestry to support DNA work.

Discussion about what can be learned from the orientation of graves and other aspects of the site and any materials included with the burials. It was noted that there were very few materials in the Portsmouth burials.

Dr. Zaid pointed out that when mortuary work is undertaken one should look at the landscape as well as positioning (in location to water, sun set, etc.). Discussion of her work in Michigan where burials were looked at without removing them; there are techniques that can be utilized to answer many questions. Additional information can be learned by looking at plats, property lines, construction notes and related historical information. She described the use of ground penetrating radar (GPR) in appropriate circumstances to help learn more about a burial ground. There was discussion that GPR might be difficult to use on Chestnut Street because it was not held as a sacred space and there are layers of different surfacing materials.

Brief discussion of the burial ground in Manhattan, NY. Portsmouth does not have the advantage of objects other than the human remains and caskets/coffins.

Dr. Zaid asked for descendant community introductions and background which was provided.

Dr. Zaid asked the committee where it sees this effort going; what is the goal in year 1, year 5?

This led to a conversation about how we still need to explore where the descendant community wants to be 1-5-10 years from now. The committee has certain information from the remains of people who lived here, how much farther to go to

investigate their lives? Would the descendant community like to know as much as it can without disturbing burials/site? Does committee try to find descendants who may for example live in California? What are the ramifications of gaining that info?

Dr. Zaid expressed understanding the fear that someone will come from California to NH to take remains. She suggested the descendant community could construct the narrative so that the story is here in Portsmouth so the person from CA wants to come back here and be part of this community; that's what she sees in the website and reflections on the stories of these burials

There was appreciation for the manner in which Dr. Zaid framed the opportunity around individuals, site, and then more broadly around community; a useful structure. The committee had to some degree been concentrating on the individuals – what they may have eaten, childhood traumas, can we associate them with certain migration patterns and ships. Dr. Zaid suggested finding a language and framework to talk about the larger community.

The issue of genealogy has come up because of databases that the info could go into if the Committee so chose; how far does the City want to go? Should the City hold information as a community, but not share to the broader genealogical community?

Discussion of some of the historical work that Ms. Cunningham has done concerning the Black seacoast community beginning in the 1600s.

Dr. Zaid offered that the committee doesn't have to be so conscious about individual stories because they become part of the community story; when presenting publicly it gets presented as part of a bigger, broader community narrative. The descendant community here is in a unique position to chart out the connections and the story. It can be difficult and challenging, but doable.

In answer to a question about family ancestry, Dr. Zaid responded that it is part of the human condition to have this need/desire to know ourselves. Will these questions be answered by Ancestry.com? No, they are taking names and selling them back to us. There are other resources – grandparents, etc. – so the Black community can find information in different ways that may not look the same to other communities. We're humans, we want to know our stories; we can get it in ways that aren't always recognizable.

Ms. Cunningham discussed the research value of Church bulletins from the 1940s and 1950s and earlier at particular church annual events. The church historian who would recite church history and then would print it in the church bulletin so that everyone would know and it would be known. We know it now even though all those people are long gone.

In follow up to a question about whether the descendent community is moving in the right direction, Dr. Zaid replied absolutely. Broadening out the research inquiry from the remaining teeth there are multiple ways that don't require excavation. She posed the question: do you want to start broadening out around the burying ground? How does that site fit within the community? How was the community gathering? That will link to

the other things the committee might be interested in. Or, maybe this existing story is enough; that there are these individuals to protect, honor, and leave at peace. Both are respectful approaches, just a matter of how the descendant community wants to move forward.

Confirmation that it is up the descendant community to determine the direction of how to go forward, how broad of any inquiry or story is developed.

Ms. Boggis noted that the sociological aspects about what we can find out beyond the remains is good; the more we find out, the more we understand the people that came before us and how we got to be where we are, satisfying human curiosity. We don't want to destroy the remains that we have in pursuit of something that may not get answered. May want to wait until the technology advances further. She is not inclined to any additional excavating.

Discussion generally of the known history of the African Burying Ground site through Ms. Cunningham's and Dr. Wheeler's work.

Brief comment concerning Langdon Cemetery – family farm with their so-called slave burial ground; it is relatively untouched and has not been built over; would be possible research opportunity.

Ms. Woodland will follow up with regard to municipal project files and preservation of records related to the construction at the burying ground site.

Dr. Zaid left the meeting at 11:35.

Committee agreed to set up another meeting in the near term to digest and discuss what was shared by Dr. Zaid.

Ms. Jackson opened up a conversation about a slave cemetery in South Carolina and how the headstones had names which helps African Americans who really want to know about themselves. This was followed by the suggestion when conditions allow of a trip to Newport to visit God's Little Acre. It can be viewed online.

Mr. Baisden indicated his support for Dr. Zaid's sharing that the descendant community can develop its own story in regards to the people interred at the African Burying Ground and build it out to connect to the broader community. Dr. Zaid helped put the Committee at ease with the larger community possibly having access to the information, what happens, happens.

Discussion about Ms. Cunningham's work on the triangle trade and the difficulty of determining place of origin.

Discussed briefly the possibility of inviting another potential Black scholar, particularly a scholar that has more experience with DNA.

Attorney Woodland will provide archaeological reports to Dr. Zaid. She will also set up another meeting, no action needed.

3. Update on available funds

Amount available in the African Burying Ground Trust approximately \$29,255.00.  
\$200 charge for web domain name will come out of Trust.

Money released from the Trust in 2019 for research (to be undertaken by Othram if samples were viable) and currently set aside and available is approximately \$7500. Samples not viable so money unspent.

No action needed or taken.

4. Curation Agreement (if any update from UNH). No response back yet from UNH regarding the draft agreement. No action needed or taken.

5. Other business, if any. No other business.

6. Next Steps/Next Meeting Date. Committee discussed finding a next meeting date, but no date set.

Ms. Cunningham moved to adjourn the meeting. Ms. Jackson seconded. All concurred.