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# M E M O R A N D U M

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**TO:** Honorable Mayor Lister and City Council Members  
**FROM:** John P. Bohenko, City Manager  
**DATE:** July 27, 2015  
**RE:** Update on Historic Cemeteries

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Please allow this memorandum to serve as an update on the ongoing efforts in the City's six historic cemeteries. As you know, the City is responsible for maintaining the six historic cemeteries including Point of Graves Burial Ground at Mechanic Street; North Cemetery at Maplewood Avenue; Union Cemetery at Maplewood Avenue; Pleasant Street Burial Ground at Pleasant Street; the African Burying Ground at Chestnut Street; and Cotton Cemetery at South Street. In these cemeteries, the City is not only responsible for the upkeep of the grounds (regular mowing and landscaping), but also the headstones; hill, ledger, and chest tombs; cemetery walls and related structures.



These repairs need to move forward in a manner consistent with historical and cultural significance of these important places. For example, some work will require archaeological sensitivity and coordination with the State Archaeologist as well as use of best practices in restoration methods in cemetery settings.

## **Overall Cemetery Needs and Funding**

In 2013, in coordination with Portsmouth Historical Society, staff initiated an existing conditions assessment and restoration plan by local masonry consultant John B. Wastrom. That report identified approximately \$800,000 in repairs and conservation efforts needed in the cemeteries. Until recently, \$10,000 each year was set aside for historic cemetery improvements through the City's Capital Improvement Plan (CIP). We found this amount to be insufficient to meet the needs of the aging and sensitive historic resources present in the cemeteries. As result, in FY 2015, the City Council set aside additional funding through the CIP and staff has been working to make progress on the improvements identified. The most recent CIP identifies consistent investment of \$40,000 from the General Fund in each of the next six years in order to make progress on the identified needs. Staff intends to leverage these funds with grants and donations from foundations and individuals, which can be deposited in the Historic Cemetery Trust adopted by the City Council in 2014. Recently, site plan approval for a large downtown development projected included \$20,000 for repair to the North Cemetery enclosure wall.

Examples of needed restoration work include North Cemetery front enclosure wall repair; Union Cemetery front entrance fence (currently in progress, see below) and stonework repair; Union Cemetery receiving tomb stabilization (see below); Pleasant Street cemetery tomb and enclosure wall repairs; and enclosure wall and tomb repairs at Point of Graves; along with various tomb and gravestone repairs throughout each cemetery.

### **North Cemetery and Union Cemeteries**

The additional funding support by the City Council has permitted the City to make progress in several areas in the North and Union Cemeteries in particular, which are summarized below.

#### *North Cemetery*

This spring the City completed the stabilization and restoration of five chest and hill tombs in North Cemetery. These improvements, carried out by a conservation mason in coordination with Portsmouth Historical Society, were focused on making historically-sensitive improvements to arrest deterioration and stabilize each site.

In addition, maintenance crews at Public Works completed tree removal and extensive tree trimming work to improve aesthetics as well as to better manage vegetation in the cemetery. Public Works also coordinated with a large volunteer group, which resulted in the removal of over 80 bags of yard waste material from the North Cemetery. North Cemetery is also the home to an Adopt-a-spot at its entrance.



## *Union Cemetery*

In late June, City contractors began work on the restoration of the front enclosure fence of Union Cemetery on Maplewood Avenue. The work is the largest improvement project to take place following the 2013 Assessment and Restoration Plan. The work, expected wrap up in the first part of August, will include the temporary removal, cleaning and refinishing of the wrought iron fence



components, and removal of the granite posts and beams for cleaning and eventual resetting. The entrance gate and sign will also be restored. The work is being carried out in coordination with the State Archaeologist as well as conservation masonry consultant John Wastrom and the Portsmouth Historical Society. The general contractor is Martini Northern of Portsmouth. Most of this work activity will take place off site and the project will be completed at the end of July.

## *Union Cemetery Receiving Tomb*



A recent article in the Portsmouth Herald highlighted the deteriorated condition of the Union Cemetery Receiving Tomb. The receiving tomb, which is not a burial site itself, is in a state of disrepair and is a known and monitored gathering place for illicit activities. Addressing this tomb's condition was included in the 2013 infrastructure assessment. Staff has researched options for addressing this issue. Together with a consulting conservation mason, the Historical Society, and the Division of Historical Resources City staff has found a historically-sensitive way to reconfigure the building remnants to return the site to stable condition. This work will take place in

conjunction with the completion of the fence work and include reusing the tomb materials to retain

the architecturally-significant façade through the reuse of the existing granite roof pieces as structural supports. The existing brick will be reused to pave the area behind the façade that will denote the footprint of the original receiving tomb location. The site will no longer have a roof, but maintain its presence as an architectural feature.

### Next Steps

The staff is currently working to identify the project that will follow the larger Union Cemetery Front Enclosure and receiving tomb reconfiguration projects and plans to move forward with additional tomb and gravestone repair during this construction season.

