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# Newport *this week*

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BORN FREE

## Monument Planned to Honor Black Heritage

By Olga Enger

Newport may soon have a new landmark to remind its residents and visitors of a period in history that some claim the city has tried to forget.

To honor Africans who died during their transatlantic voyages during the slave trade and those who survived and became a key part of Newport's economy and culture, a marker will be installed in Liberty Square on Marlborough Street. During the slave trade, Newport was one of four Rhode Island slave ports, including Bristol, Providence and Warren.

"The first Africans arrived in this country about 1619. That's about 400 years ago," said Victoria Johnson, chair of the Newport Port Marker Project at a Newport City Council meeting. "Soon after, the slave ships came, crossing the middle passage. They arrived in 42 ports in America. Rhode Island was the only state with four ports. Newport became very prosperous in the triangle [transatlantic] trade," she said.

Local slave owners purchased the kidnapped Africans for plantations, Middletown farms and to

serve as slave craftsmen in Newport. The individuals who were not sold were put to work aboard merchant ships. By the early 1800s, black seamen made up 20 percent of Newport crews, according to historian Douglas Harper's website, slavenorth.com. Newport eventually became the colony's leading slave port, which brought an estimated 59,000 slaves to America before the Revolution. In the years after the war, Rhode Island merchants controlled between 60 and 90 percent of the American slave trade, according to Harper.

"The slave trade was horrible, but my heritage of people survived. And they contributed, and they made Newport the city it is now," said Johnson. "We survived. You, you, and, you. You all survived," she said, pointing to African Americans in the room.

The "Middle Passage" refers to the voyage in triangular trade, during which millions of Africans were shipped to the United States to be sold. It is estimated that between two and four million Africans died from the process of being kid-

napped and transported. Slaves were placed below the decks as cargo, often in conditions of extreme squalor that led to high mortality rates.

Even the crews were coerced into working on the slave ships, according to historian Marcus Rediker in his book "The Slave Ship." In port towns such as Newport, recruiters and tavern owners encouraged sailors to drink, thus becoming indebted

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ed to slave trading companies. They would be presented an option of prison or working the ship. An estimated 20 percent of crew members died during the trip, due to disease, flogging or slave uprisings.

Newport City Council unani-

mously approved a resolution that supported the marker in a 7-0 vote at the June 14 meeting. The landmark's location was selected due to Liberty Park's proximity to other historical landmarks such as the Colony House, the Quaker Meeting House and "God's Little Acre" in the Common Burial Ground. Once the committee completes the design, the council will vote on the final approval.

A resolution of council support stated, "the committee is endeavoring to fill a void in our city's history which has never been fully acknowledged nor included in the curriculum of our schools in a meaningful way. By locating an historical marker acknowledging and honoring those who were brought here through the middle passage, forgotten by history, yet who still passed down their heritage to us, an important first step will be taken in this process."

Johnson said the one equalizer in Newport since the 19th century has been the public school system.

"After the integration of schools, brought about by Mr. Downing in the 19th Century, we all went to the same schools...we were

all taught together. And we were taught and we were told that we were all equal."

George Downing was a wealthy Newport political leader and restaurateur, who pushed the Rhode Island legislature to integrate the public school system. He first financed a campaign of protest in 1857, which eventually became successful in 1866.

However, Johnson said Newport's educational system hasn't taught students the real story of local black history. One goal of the landmark is to mark a "new beginning" for the city that allows room for citizens to accept Newport's darker periods of its own story.

"The committee is forging partnerships with local historical societies, cultural organizations, academic institutions, churches and tourism bureaus to build a new beginning for Newport history; and the committee also seeks to broaden the understanding of the economic and cultural contributions of African Americans in the City of Newport," reads the resolution.

Johnson thanked the council for support and positive feedback received since the committee began the project in December. Her group is part of a nationwide, non-profit Middle Passage Port Marker Project that is working to place historical markers in port communities like Newport.

"This is an exciting project," said Council Vice Chair Lynn Ceglie.

"It's time and we are all ready. We are all ready for one Newport," said Johnson.

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