Newport Middle Passage Ceremony and Port Marker Project

Founding Committee

Matthew Boyle

Josephine Brown

Peter Fay

Ernest B Gibbons, Jr.

Cynthia Hamilton, Ph.D.

Victoria Johnson

Benedict Leca, Ph.D.

Carole Peterson

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John Pope

Judith K. Porter

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Ruth Taylor

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**FIRST MEETING OF NEWPORT MIDDLE PASSAGE CEREMONY AND PORT MARKER PROJECT
INTRODUCES GOALS AND OPENS COMMUNITY DIALOGUE**

Wednesday, 2nd November 2016, Newport, Rhode Island… The Founding Committee of the Newport Middle Passage Ceremony and Port Marker Project hosted its first community meeting last week at Redwood Library with over forty in attendance. Chairperson, Victoria Johnson, long-time educator and community activist opened the gathering explaining that the Newport Project is part of a national initiative to commemorate the nearly 12 million Africans involved in the Middle Passage Transatlantic human trade. Its goals include:

- Installing historic markers in designated port cities
- Forging partnerships with local historical societies, cultural organizations, academic institutions, churches and tourism bureaus
- Acknowledging & recognizing the significant contributions Africans and their descendants made to each local community and the country.

In Rhode Island, four port cities have been identified: Bristol, Newport, Providence and Warren. An active Rhode Island branch of the national effort was established in January of this year and the Newport committee of community, church and academic leaders first met in April. Johnson introduced the Steering Committee: Peter Fay, Dr. Benedict Leca, Patricia Pettit, Charles Roberts and Dr. Brian Sullivan.

Fay placed the project in historical context noting that half of all North American voyages were launched by Rhode Islanders with Newport providing over 85% of their financing during the Colonial Period. From the early 1700s until it's outlawing in 1807, the Slave Trade dominated every aspect of Rhode Island's economy from shipbuilding to horse breeding, finance to fishing, and wool to rum. Asking, "Why is this important to us as Newporters?", Fay concluded, "Much of the heritage of Newport was built upon the Slave Trade with over 106,000 humans sold by Rhode Island traders…yet there is no physical trace or acknowledgement of it. We wish to honor and memorialize those who survived the journey to help build the Newport of today".

Dr. Benedict Leca, Executive Director of The Redwood Library presented the rationale of the Newport Marker Project citing the importance of remembering, forgetting does not heal; the necessity of history being restored to its fullness and the costs of repression, the benefits of remembering. Leca turned to the words of Elie Wiesel in emphasizing the vital work of this initiative, "Memory not only honors those we lost but also gives us strength". Leca continued, "History gives us perspectives, insights and strength to confront the enduring problems of today, guiding us to solutions. By acknowledging "Middle Passagers" we are undertaking a dialog that will hopefully bring us together as Newporters and Americans especially at this time."

A vibrant question and answer session followed with queries of how to become involved, details on location of markers, art form being considered, timetable and suggestions regarding cultural tourism.

In closing, Johnson invited all who may be interested in participating to join the committee.

The Founding Committee members of the Newport Port Marker Project are:
Matthew Boyle, Josephine Brown, Peter Fay, Ernest B. Gibbons, Jr., Dr. Cynthia Hamilton, Victoria Johnson, Dr. Benedict Leca, Carole Peterson, Patricia Barry Pettit, John Pope, Judith K. Porter, Charles Roberts, Earl N. Smith III, Dr. Brian Sullivan, Ruth Taylor, Gerald Williams, James Winters and Eileen Westgate.

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