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They made their mark

An effort is underway to commemorate the contributions of African victims of slave trade and their descendants

By Sean Flynn
Staff writer

NEWPORT — The slave trade dominated every aspect of Rhode Island's economy — from shipbuilding to horse breeding, finance to fishing, and wool to rum — from the early 1700s until the outlawing of the trade in 1807, according to historians. About half of all North American slave-trading voyages were launched by Rhode Islanders, with Newport providing more than 85 percent of their financing, during the Colonial period.



Johnson

Many people locally are not aware of that history, something the Newport Middle Passage Ceremony and Port Marker Project wants to change.

The founding committee headed by Victoria Johnson, a former principal of Rogers

High School, met at the Redwood Library last week to discuss placing a monument to commemorate the nearly 12 million Africans involved in the trans-Atlantic human trade and their descendants.

"People have swept this history under the table," Johnson said. "People should be aware of the history of the slaves — those who survived and those who didn't — and their descendants."

"This is about humanizing the victims of the triangular trade," she said. The initiative is not about placing guilt or shame, she said.

Instead, the initiative is about acknowledging and recognizing the significant contributions Africans and their descendants made to this community and to the country, Johnson said.

Rhode Island has four communities identified as places where markers or monuments should be placed. Besides this city, they include Providence, Bristol and Warren. The statewide

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VICTORIA JOHNSON

head of the founding committee of the Newport Middle Passage Ceremony and Port Marker Project

committee coordinating this effort plans to meet at the Redwood Library on Nov. 18, beginning at 4 p.m.

The national Middle Passage Ceremony and Port Marker Project was founded in 2011 by Ann L. Chinn, a self-described community activist from Washington, D.C., who now serves as executive director.

During the triangular trade, European, New England or other Colonial merchants brought goods such as copper, cloth, trinkets, beads, rum, guns and ammunition to West Africa and traded the goods for slaves.

The slaves then were transported to the Caribbean and North American colonies, where the use of African slaves was fundamental to growing cash crops such as sugar cane and tobacco. Sugar in its liquid form, molasses, was brought to places like Newport, where distilleries brewed rum from it.

"The slave trade just grew and grew," Johnson said. "I'm still learning about it."

The rum and other products were shipped across the Atlantic, some to Europe and some to Africa, where the products were used to purchase more slaves.

The leg of this triangular trade model that involved the transport of slaves across the Atlantic is called the "Middle Passage."

The national Middle Passage Ceremony and Port Marker Project is researching and identifying all 48 port sites in the present United States that were ports of entry for Africans during the 350 years of the trans-Atlantic human trade. Local communities are encouraged to hold remembrance ceremonies at each port and place some type of marker.

The local group would like to erect a stone statue or monument that is yet to be designed, Johnson said. Locations for the monument also are being discussed.

The national group is forging partnerships with local historical societies, cultural organizations, academic institutions, churches and tourism bureaus as part of the effort.

The local steering committee includes Peter Fay, an employee of Brown University; Benedict Leca, executive director of the Redwood Library; and residents Patricia Pettit, Charles Roberts and Brian Sullivan. Fay outlined the history of the slave trade to a group of about 40 people who met last week at the Redwood Library.

"Much of the heritage of Newport was built upon the slave trade with over 106,000 Newport was built upon the slave trade with over 106,000

humans sold by Rhode Island traders, yet there is no physical trace or acknowledgment of it," Fay said in a written statement. "We wish to honor and memorialize those who survived the journey to help build the Newport of today."

Much of the data for the slave trade in this country comes from the Voyages Transatlantic Slave Trade database, which is on the internet. People can go to the website and find ship names and the numbers of slaves transported on each voyage.

"History gives us perspectives, insights and strength to confront the enduring problems of today, guiding us to solutions," Leca said in the statement. "By acknowledging 'Middle Passagers,' we are undertaking a dialogue that will hopefully bring us together as Newporters and Americans especially at this time."

Besides Johnson and the steering committee members, other members of the local founding committee include Matthew Boyle, Josephine Brown, Ernest B. Gibbons Jr., Cynthia Hamilton, Carole Peterson, John Pope, Judith K. Porter, Earl N. Smith III, Ruth Taylor, Gerald Williams, James Winters and Eileen Westgate.

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