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Newport *this week*

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Remembering Newport's Role in the 'Middle Passage'

By Rona Mann

When we think of slavery in the United States, Newport does not readily come to mind. But it does to Newporters. The city played a significant part in what is known as the "Middle Passage." It's a part of history that many would like to forget, but because of a nationwide project supported by a local grassroots organization, it will be remembered, taught and commemorated.

"We want to involve as many local people as possible in this project, people who derived a part of their history from the Middle Passage," said Victoria Johnson, chairperson of the Newport Middle Passage Port Marker Project.

The Middle Passage was part of the triangular trade of the 17th century when ships departed Europe for Africa with manufactured goods. Enslaved Africans were part of a forced migration across the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas, where they were sold or traded for raw materials, which were then exported back to Europe, where the process would begin once again.

Newport was one of four ports in the Middle Passage of human trafficking in Rhode Island, which also included Bristol, Providence

and Warren. The city thus played a major, albeit infamous, role in Newport's black history.

In 2011, the Middle Passage Ceremonies and Port Markers Project (MPCPMP) was established in New York to honor the 2 million captive Africans who died and the 10 million who survived during the Middle Passage crossings. The nonprofit organization has encouraged local communities to hold remembrance ceremonies at each of the 48 Middle Passage port sites in the country, and it supports the installation of historic markers to establish a permanent record of those who survived.

The MPCPMP also seeks to educate communities about the vital role that Africans played in the development of our nation. It has partnered with local historical and cultural societies, academic institutions, churches, tourist bureaus and other community organizations to promote this important part of that shared history.

An unveiling of the local site of Newport's Middle Passage historic marker in Liberty Square at Marlborough and Farewell Streets is planned in August to honor those who died and the survivors who

went on to become an intricate part of Newport's economy and culture.

"At this time, we are working with a monument and building committee, people who are very well acquainted with the procedures that need to be put in place for this project," Johnson said. "We are looking for a facilitator, looking at schools [and] speaking with construction companies, but we are taking our time to do so because we want it to be right."

Newport Middle Passage has initiated a summer lecture series to educate the community about the project and this period in Newport's history. A lecture by Lorén Spears and Bob Geake, entitled "Indigenous Enslavement in Rhode Island: Facts, Impacts, & the Path Toward Reconciliation," will be held on Tuesday, July 31 at the Newport Public Library. Spears and Geake will share the impacts of the enslavement of the indigenous, pre-colonial inhabitants of the region.

Geake is vice president of the Cocumscussoc Association, which maintains and oversees Smith's Castle in North Kingstown. Spears is assistant director of the Tomaquag Museum in Exeter.

"We want to bring to the fore-

front of this project the fact that there was a lot of slavery in New England," said Geake. "It is important to remember that you cannot talk about this project without talking about the indigenous people. Black slaves were brought through the Middle Passage only after the Indians were exported. We need to go a long way in the healing process for these indigenous people to be recognized, but they must be."

The free program begins at 6 p.m.

A second lecture, also beginning at 6 p.m., will take place Wednesday, Aug. 22, at the Newport Historical Society. Dr. Akeia Benard, curator of Social History at the New Bedford Whaling Museum, will present "Un-erasing African American History in the Landscape of Newport."

"While I was doing my graduate work that took me to Native American reservations, I often heard, 'I didn't know black people lived in Newport,'" she said. "Comments like that made me decide to focus my dissertation on uncovering black history here. Black people were always part of the landscape of Newport. It wasn't all the Gilded Age."