

PEOPLE SAVING PLACES

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# preservation

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## CARVED IN MEMORY

*IN NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND, A CENTURIES-OLD BURYING  
GROUND HIGHLIGHTS THE CITY'S BLACK HISTORY*



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CHAPTER





# PRECIOUS

*THE CARVED MARKERS AT GOD'S LITTLE ACRE PROVIDE CLUES*

# STONES

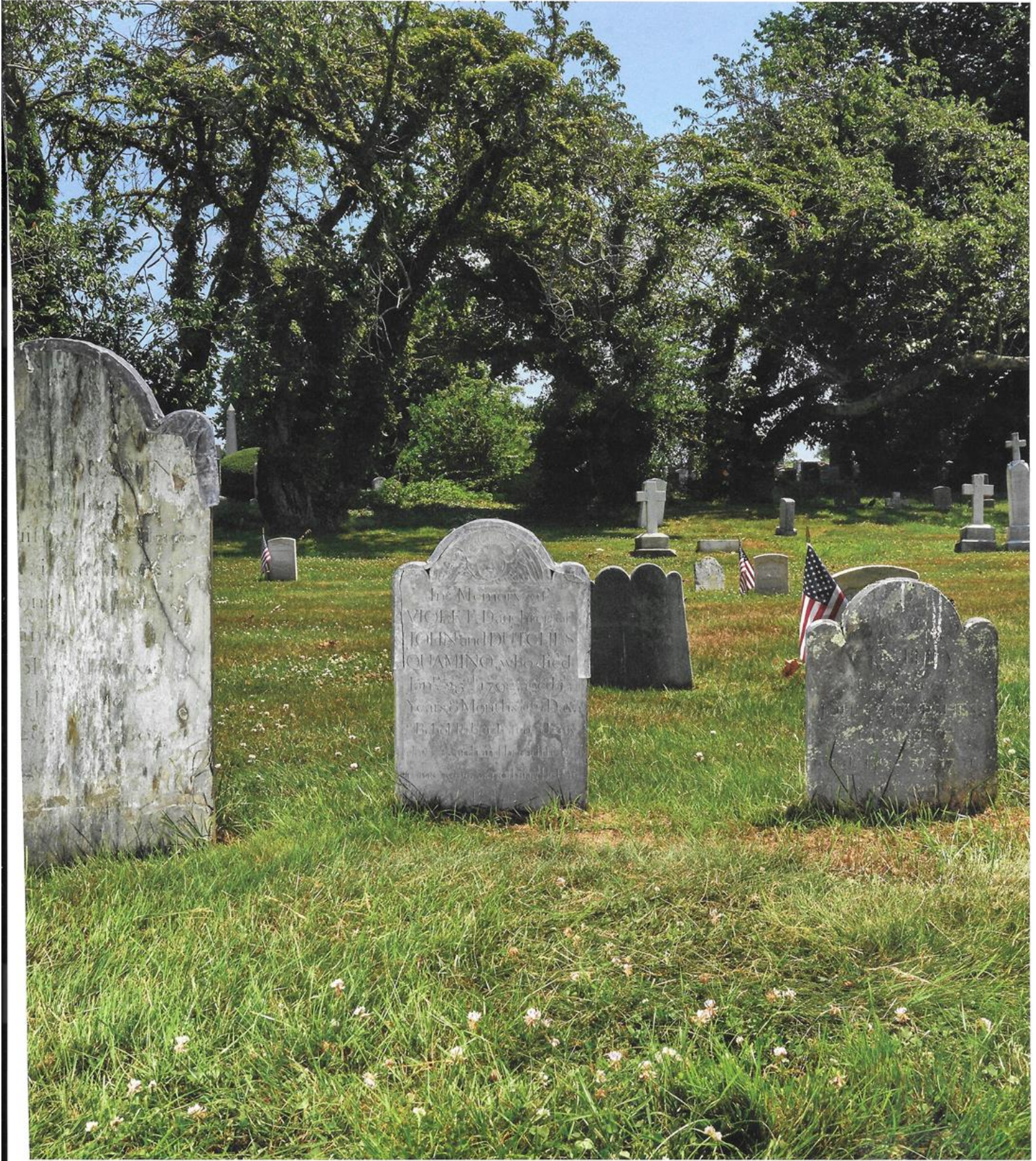
*TO NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND'S AFRICAN AMERICAN PAST*



**R**amble around God's Little Acre, a serene burying ground in Newport, Rhode Island, and you may come across this weathered headstone: "In memory of Duchess Quamino," it reads, "a free black of distinguished excellence: intelligent, industrious, affectionate, honest, and of exemplary piety, who deceased June 4, 1804, aged 65." A stone can be the doorway to a thousand stories.

BY KATE SIBER  PHOTOGRAPHY BY PHILIP C. KEITH









**QUAMINO WAS BORN ON THE GOLD COAST** of what is now Ghana around 1739 and traveled captive across the Atlantic on a slave ship. After she arrived in Colonial-era Rhode Island, William Channing, the colony's attorney general, enslaved her as a cook and baker. She married another African, John Quamino, who had been sent by his prosperous Ghanaian family to learn a trade in North America. Instead, an unscrupulous captain sold him into slavery.

John Quamino won a public lottery, purchased his freedom with the proceeds, and worked as a privateer during the American Revolution with the goal of earning enough money to free Duchess and their children. Tragically, he died in the war, but Duchess did not let that stop her from securing her own freedom and, some accounts say, that of her children, too. She ran a catering business, and her treats were so tasty she became renowned as the great "pastry queen" of Rhode Island. Legend holds that even George Washington was partial to her frosted plum cakes.

Now, Duchess Quamino rests in the largest intact Colonial-era African burying ground in the country. When approaching Newport from the west, cross over the Newport Bridge onto Aquidneck Island, take a right, and you will find God's Little Acre along Farewell Street. Part of the larger Common Burying Ground, God's Little Acre holds the remains of more than a thousand residents of African heritage who died around the time it was established, circa 1705, through 1990.

Among the markers are treasures of history: monuments to mysterious souls who left no records except a few words etched in stone, as well as people who led exceptional and well-documented lives. There's the family of Pompe Stevens, a stone carver who worked in the John Stevens Shop, which still exists today. His signature may be the first existing mark of any African American artisan. Arthur Flagg, also known as Arthur Tikey, was a rope

maker and distinguished member of the Free African Union Society. Among the later burials, Harriet A. Rice was the first African American woman to graduate from Wellesley College. As a physician, she earned one of the highest civilian honors from the French government for her service treating French soldiers in World War I.

**Today, God's Little Acre is a peaceful** swath of grass and trees dotted with slate, granite, and marble markers. Visitors peer at the historic inscriptions and carvings as dog walkers stroll by. Immaculate houses that date back centuries line the nearby streets. "God's Little Acre grabs your attention as you come into town," says Lew Keen, chairman of Newport's Historic Cem-







etary Advisory Commission. “The site is very serene, very pleasant. You kind of have to wander around and discover it.”

God’s Little Acre wasn’t always so beloved and well kept. When preservationist Theresa Guzmán Stokes moved to Newport in the 1980s as a staffer for the United States Navy, she noticed that the area was overgrown, while other graveyards nearby were trim and tidy. Accompanied by Rowena Stewart, the founder and then-executive director of the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society, she approached the mayor, who arranged for city employees to mow and clean up the site. Over the years, Stokes and her husband, Keith, an eighth-generation Newporter, have become the burying ground’s most ardent advocates. Along with other

supporters in the preservation community, they have organized cleanups in the spring and fall, and offered tours for both adults and schoolchildren.

Interest in the burying ground and the stories of those interred there has snowballed in recent years. The stones themselves, however, are deteriorating. Since 1903, when a survey noted more than 300 markers, 70 have been lost, although some of those have been recovered more recently. New England winters are hard on slate gravestones, which are made of layers, like puff pastry. These slim leaves splinter apart after repeated freeze-thaw cycles.

From 2017 to 2019, the city oversaw the preservation of 22 headstones with funding from the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society and private donations, as well

*Previous page:* The headstone for Violet, daughter of John and Duchess Quamino, who died in 1792. *Opposite:* Duchess Quamino’s headstone. *This page:* Wide gaps in between stones at God’s Little Acre indicate places where additional markers may be missing or buried.





*This page, from left:* Headstones for Elizabeth Stevens (d. 1779); Phillis and Prince Stevens (d. 1773); and Cuffe Gibbs (d. 1768). *Opposite:* Headstones for Violet Stevens (d. 1803); Violet Hammond (d. 1772); and Hector Butcher (d. 1720).

as guidance from the Newport Historic Cemetery Advisory Commission. A 2019 grant from the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund allowed the Preservation Society of Newport County to conserve another 20 headstones last fall and 20 more this past summer. Lisa Cornell and her team at Beyond the Gravestone, a Connecticut-based restoration company, cleaned each marker, filled in cracks, consolidated the layers, and capped the stones with mortar to protect them from water infiltration.

Part of the reason the burying ground is so treasured is because the stories of African and African American history from the American Colonial period aren’t always widely known—even though Black people played important roles in every aspect of life in Newport and beyond.

“The burying ground is a wonderful starting point for getting those stories out because we can point to a gravesite and say, ‘this is the person’s story,’” says Theresa Guzmán Stokes, who is now the executive

director of the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society. She is also president of 1696 Heritage Group, which assists organizations in highlighting the contributions of underrepresented communities to American history through consulting, website development, and other services. “It becomes very real. It’s a physical touchstone to the past.”

Over the past couple of decades, the Stokeses and others (including Lew Keen) have offered hundreds of God’s Little Acre tours to visitors and students. Often, they say, white visitors are surprised to hear a story about African American history that does not focus on slavery. Instead, the tours celebrate the contributions that free and enslaved residents of African heritage were able to make despite enslavement and oppression. Black schoolchildren, especially, are frequently fascinated and awed.

“For Black folks, it’s a homecoming,” says Keith Stokes, vice president of 1696 Heritage Group. “Black folks get very excited about looking at the markers, hearing the stories, and feeling a real sense of pride



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that this is our history—this is our people.”

For the Stokeses, sharing these tales has become a calling. Traditionally, history education in the United States has centered on European and white perspectives. As a result, Theresa says, people of color often feel disconnected from the roles their ancestors played in the country’s development and prosperity: “Without knowledge of the struggles for freedom and equality, and the numerous achievements of our people, how can young people of color see a future of equality and success for themselves?”

Unlike many descendants of enslaved Africans, for whom family records are difficult to find, Keith Stokes has a deep knowledge of and connection to the contributions of his forebears, including those buried in God’s Little Acre. He still has family heirlooms that date to the time of enslavement, and in 2019 he traveled to Ghana to give a lecture about his ancestors for the Heritage and Cultural Society of Africa. There, he visited the 18th-century Fort William at Anomabo and strode through the very door—known as “the Door of

No Return”—that his own ancestor walked through on the way to North America.

“The village leader said, ‘well, for you, it’s the door of re-turn, because you came back!’” says Stokes. With his hosts, he participated in a libation ceremony, a memorial offering during which people pour liquid over the site where ancestors lived. As part of the ritual, he buried soil from God’s Little Acre to represent those ancestors’ return to their homeland. Soon, he will lead a similar ceremony in Newport, delivering soil from the fort at Anomabo to God’s Little Acre to complete the circle.

**The community of Newport wasn’t** always open to celebrating its African American history. Even 20 to 30 years ago, “all of us polite New Englanders did not want to associate New England’s Colonial history with slavery,” says Keith Stokes. “No one was ready for that. It was out of sight, out of mind. Keep things buried ... People had to understand that this is a story that we all share.”





*This page:* Theresa Guzmán Stokes and Keith Stokes, experts on God's Little Acre and Newport's underrepresented history. *Opposite, top and right:* Lisa Cornell of Beyond the Gravestone at work conserving a God's Little Acre marker; *Opposite, left:* Cuffe Gibbs' marker was created by his brother Pompey (also spelled Pompe) Stevens, a well-known stone carver.

The colony of Rhode Island played a major role in the slave trade in North America. In Newport, the first documented ship carrying enslaved Africans arrived in 1696. Before the American Revolution, the city was a significant slave-trading port in Rhode Island, which was one of the most active slave-trading colonies in British North America. In the middle of the 18th century, Africans represented about 17 percent of the community's population. It is believed that by 1770, one of every four households in the city enslaved at least one person.

While Rhode Island did have some large farms, slavery generally looked different from the sweltering cotton fields of the South that most Americans associate with the institution. White Newporters worked closely alongside enslaved Africans in a variety of skilled trades in the maritime industry. People of African heritage worked as rope makers, carpenters, sailors, glassblowers, stone carvers, and seamstresses in sail-making shops. Many of Newport's beloved historic structures, such as Redwood Library and Athenaeum, the Colony House, and Touro Synagogue—a National Trust Historic Site and the country's oldest Jewish house of worship—were built by skilled African craftsmen, both enslaved and free.

Visitors are often surprised to learn that most of the Africans who arrived here were children. It wasn't uncommon for kids as young as 7 to be sold into the transatlantic slave trade and forced to make the six- to eight-month voyage. The majority of Africans who arrived in Newport were from what is today Ghana, though some may have come from Senegal and Nigeria. As a result,

the Ghanaians shared customs and languages, which made it easier for them to retain their traditions and identities, as well as to organize among themselves.

In 1780, a group of African men in Newport gathered to form the country's first Free African Union Society, a mutual aid society. Soon similar organizations would be founded in Providence, Boston, and beyond. They aimed to care for those in the African community and maintain and celebrate their identities. Many debated returning to Africa, and some in fact did brave the long journey back across the ocean. In Newport, the society created one of the first free African schools in the country and raised funds to pay for burials to ensure Africans in the community would have a place to rest.

**Nearly two and a half centuries** after the society formed, God's Little Acre is still here, filled with markers arranged by the families of free African Americans, as well as enslavers. While other Colonial cities had large Black populations, their African burying grounds were often forgotten or, in some cases, destroyed. Not only does God's Little Acre harbor the largest number of carved headstones of any Colonial-era African burying ground in the U.S., they are decorated in distinctive ways with carvings of faces, symbols, and elegant lettering.

"If you stoop down and really study these stones and look at them, you'll find that there was a whole group of people who lived totally differently than the other citizens of Newport—but they managed to retain their identity," says Glenn Knoblock, an independent historian and author of *African American Historic Burial Grounds and Gravesites of New England* and other books on historic cemeteries. "Those images that you see, you cannot see anywhere else in New England and very few other places in the eastern United States. That's what makes it one of the most historic places in African American history in the entire country. These treasures are hidden in the wide-open spaces. They're there for everyone to see."

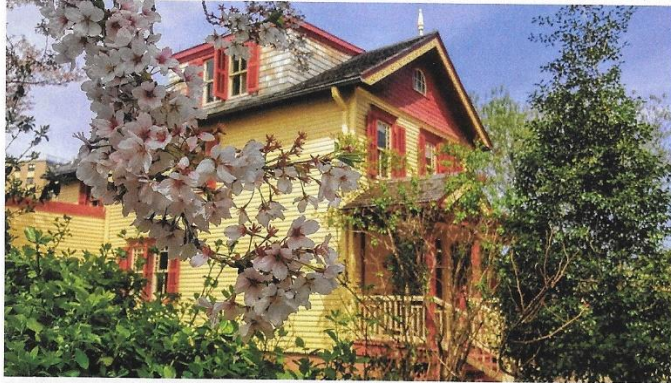






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I WANDER AROUND STILL AFTER ALL THESE YEARS AND I'LL COME ACROSS A STONE I HAVEN'T READ BEFORE AND I'LL THINK, 'WHO IS THIS GUY?'" —RUTH S. TAYLOR



## SAVING AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURAL HERITAGE

IN 2019, THE PRESERVATION SOCIETY OF NEWPORT received a \$50,000 grant from the National Trust's African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund for the conservation of gravestones at God's Little Acre. This past summer, the Trust announced the fund's 27 grantees for 2020, which include the Lewis Latimer House Museum (shown) in Flushing, New York; the Muddy Waters House in Chicago; and the Maxville Heritage Interpretive Center in Joseph, Oregon. For more on these and other current and past Action Fund grant recipients, visit [SavingPlaces.org/african-american-cultural-heritage](https://SavingPlaces.org/african-american-cultural-heritage)

PHOTO BY ADRIAN SAS



**More and more people** have been taking an interest in God's Little Acre over the past few years, and locals expect the burgeoning curiosity to continue. This summer, as protests against police brutality, racial violence, and inequity spread across the nation, many Americans looked to unearth historical stories as they wrestled for a better understanding of race.

"One thing we have certainly learned recently is the well of racism in this country is as deep as it ever was," says Ruth S. Taylor of the Newport Historical Society. "We need to grapple with that. And one of the ways people are going to grapple with it is to try to learn more about the history—and that's a place where we can be useful." The society's tours, which include one of the Common Burying Ground and God's Little Acre, seamlessly incorporate the roles and accomplishments of people of color in Newport's history. "I don't want people to come to Newport and take the African American tour," says Taylor. "I want people to come to Newport and take a history tour and learn everything."

As God's Little Acre sees more traffic, Keith Stokes acknowledges that increasing interest may lead to deterioration. Situated near a sign for the burying ground, printed flyers help educate visitors on the site's significance and how to visit respectfully. (Grave rubbings are not allowed, for example, because they can chip the stones.)

His mother, who is 97, remembers strolling in God's Little Acre as a girl and seeing so many markers, you could barely walk through. Now, wide grassy gaps stretch across the area. Did the missing stones fall over and become covered in soil? After the preservation projects are completed, the Stokeses hope to find out by using ground-penetrating radar.

Brown University architecture students are also collecting 3D images of the markers in God's Little Acre and mapping the area using aerial drones. They plan to compile the materials into a database and share it with Newport's Historic Cemetery Advisory Commission, which will eventually publicize their





work. Meanwhile, those involved with the commission and the Preservation Society of Newport County hope to secure the funds to preserve the remainder of the disintegrating stones so that they can continue to be a resource to scholars, schoolchildren, and visitors. One individual donor has already committed to funding the preservation of 44 more stones.

"I wander around still after all these years and I'll come across a stone I haven't read before and I'll think, 'who is this guy?'" says the Newport Historical Society's Taylor. "And I would like visitors to New-

port to do that, too. In some cases we can help answer that question, and in some cases somebody else may answer it in the future. Who are the people buried at God's Little Acre? How did they get to Newport? What did they do when they got here? These are the kinds of questions that we're hoping people will come and ask." ■

**KATE SIBER** is a freelance writer based in Durango, Colorado, and the author of the children's books *National Parks of the U.S.A.* and *50 Adventures in the 50 States*. Her last story for *Preservation* was on Harriet Tubman, in the Spring 2020 issue.

The headstone for Arthur Flagg, a rope maker who died in 1810 and was also known as Arthur Tikey, sits near other markers for members of his family.