

The Classic Coast, the Triangle Trade and Slave History

During the colonial period, Newport was considered the “rum capital of the world” with 22 rum distilleries that were supplied sugar and molasses harvested and processed by slaves in the Caribbean. In Bristol, the wealthy DeWolf family amassed their fortune in part by financing ships to West Africa for captured Africans to enslave. They became the largest slave-trading family in the country, and also had their own distillery. Today, there are a number of efforts dedicated to recognizing and honoring the enslavement of indigenous people and Africans in the area. The Newport Middle Passage Port Marker Committee has worked with the City to establish a site for a Newport Slave Trade Memorial to honor and memorialize Africans who lost their lives on slave ships as well as the survivors and their descendants. The local project is part of a national effort (The Middle Passage and Port Markers Project) to research and identify the 48 sites in the U.S. that were ports of entry for Africans during the transatlantic slave trade.

Similarly, the Rhode Island Slave History Medallions Project is working hard to install markers at properties that have a connection to slavery. The first medallion has been installed at Patriots Park in Portsmouth which honors the heroism of the First Rhode Island Regiment, known as the “Black Regiment.”

Enslaved, formerly enslaved and free African men and women also contributed to colonial Newport’s economy via the artisan trades including masonry, woodworking, ropemaking, shipbuilding, candle-making, printing and notably, furniture making. Many of these skilled artisans are buried in God’s Little Acre, considered one of the oldest in-tact burying grounds for enslaved and free Africans. In July of 2019, the Preservation Society of Newport County received a \$50,000 grant from the National Trust of Historic Preservation’s African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund to preserve this nationally recognized treasure which includes 200 meticulously hand-carved headstones.