

Legacy of Newmarket founding father revealed

Sunday, December 22, 2002, By Rachel Grace Toussaint, from news@seacoastonline.com

NEWMARKET - Rich Alperin has been thinking a lot about destiny lately. What else would have driven him to research a man who lived nearly 300 years ago, to whom he has no bloodline connection?

In doing this research for the past 10 months, Alperin has discovered a silent legacy of Newmarket: that, in Alperin's words, "One of the founding fathers of the town was a black man." This man, Wentworth Cheswell, was buried right near Alperin's house on South Main Street. The gravesite, according to Alperin, has deeply deteriorated. So Alperin is following another drive: awakening people to the life and efforts of Cheswell in hopes of ultimately restoring Cheswell's gravesite.



Homeward drawn

Circumstances leading up to Alperin's interest in Cheswell is a story in and of itself. Alperin has lived in Newmarket since 1986. Originally, he lived on Elm Street across from the Riverside Cemetery. "(My family) lived in a split-level house, and we had no reason to move," Alperin explained. But in October 1999, an old house located at 204 South Main Street went on the market, and Alperin and his wife found themselves drawn to the home. They inquired about the cost, but it was well out of their price-range. Then, Alperin's wife suggested they go to the open house.

"'Are you insane,' I asked her. I'm a construction worker, my wife is a secretary, and this house was priced well into the \$300,000 (price range)," Alperin explained. "I wouldn't even go to see it." His wife went, however, and fell in love with the house. The winter went by, and no offers were made on the old home; so the owner kept dropping the price. Then, three-acres of land that were initially being sold with the house, sold as a separate entity and the price of the house dropped even more. Finally, the Realtor called the Alperins and asked them to make an offer - any offer - if they were still interested in it. "We made a ridiculous offer and they took it," Alperin said.

Time for research

As Alperin and the previous owner began talking about the history of the house, Alperin learned the home he just bought was the third house to rest on that foundation. The first was owned by Cheswell.

Alperin's family moved into their new home in 2001, and in February 2002, Alperin was laid off from work due to an injury. "I had a lot of time on my hands," he said. So he began looking more into the history of his home. He did deed and genealogy research, merely because he thought it would be nice to have the original deed from when that property was purchased from the Cheswell family.

The more Alperin learned, the more he wanted to research Cheswell.



Through his digging, Alperin learned Cheswell lived from 1747 until 1817 and owned the home during the Revolutionary War. Interestingly, Alperin discovered Cheswell was born to a half-black man named Hopestill Cheswell, a well-known builder of his time, and whose mother was white. Hopestill's wife and Cheswell's mother was also a white woman, which, according to Alperin made Cheswell one-quarter black.

Apparently, Hopestill had enough finances to send Cheswell to a private boys' school called Dummer Academy in Byfield, Mass. According to Alperin, few people in the Colonial Era were formally educated, mostly due to cost and lack of inexpensive public schooling. Education of any formal sort in colonial New England carried a high degree of social status.

After graduating, Cheswell worked as a teacher in Newmarket, all the while dedicating his life to town service. In 1768 he moved into his first elected position as Town Constable. "Between 1768 and 1817, every single year he served the town in some capacity, except for one year," Alperin said. "He was a selectman, an auditor, an assessor, a scrivener, and a justice of the peace."

Alperin says Cheswell's work as a scrivener truly benefited Newmarket. "At some point Cheswell realized that the town's hand-written records were in danger of disappearing, so he took a journal and hand copied the town's records starting from their first meeting in 1727," Alperin said. By the 1760s, Cheswell owned more than 30 acres of land and a pew in the town meeting house. By 1770, Cheswell owned 114 acres and was fashioned a "yeoman."

The British are coming!

During the Revolutionary War, Cheswell was on the Committee of Safety. He acted as a messenger, transferring messages back and forth from Newmarket to Exeter. "And just like Paul Revere made that famous midnight run from Boston to Lexington and Concord," Alperin said, "Cheswell made a midnight run back here from Boston to let people know that the British were coming."

Alperin learned life, two generations earlier in Cheswell's family, was not so prestigious. Cheswell's grandfather, Richard, was a black slave in Newmarket. In order to gain understanding as to why Wentworth's life was so different from his grandfather's, Alperin read a thesis written by a former University of New Hampshire graduate student. The student, Erik Tuveson, studied Wentworth Cheswell as part of his research on race and race identification in New Hampshire between 1750 and 1825.

In the abstract of Tuveson's thesis, he explains his theory as to why Cheswell flourished. "The small numbers of people of color living in New Hampshire held only limited economic and political power," Tuveson wrote. "As a collective whole, they did not pose a threat to white authority and majority."

Restoring his legacy

Regardless of the reasons why Cheswell could serve the town the way he did, Alperin feels the town today needs to honor him more for his services. Alperin's current mission is ensuring Cheswell's gravesite is restored. Members of the Newmarket Historical Society have asked the Town Council to restore it, but the council said they needed to find out who owns that property first.

"I took that challenge," Alperin said. And he learned that when a man named Elmer Smart - one of the purchasers of the property after the Cheswells - sold it, everything was included in the deed except for the gravesite. "He kept it for himself and he forgot that he kept it for himself," Alperin said.

So Alperin started researching the Smart family to see if he could locate any descendants and speak to them about having the site preserved. He found one descendent in Massachusetts who agreed that portion of the land should be deeded to the town or the Historical Society. According to Alperin, the Historical Society voted unanimously to set up a gravesite repair fund, and they are currently accepting donations. Their goal is to ultimately remove the current tombstone, and erect a new one, the cost of which will be between \$2,000 to \$3,000. Then they will restore the old tombstone, housing it in the Historical Society's museum.

Alperin said he'd also like to have Cheswell's gravesite registered as a stop on the Portsmouth Black Heritage Trail, and ask the state if they would erect a historic marker at the site. "This guy was an incredible guy," Alperin said. "And it's eerie for me that I'm occupying the same space on this planet that he occupied."

Connections between Alperin and the Cheswell family grow even eerier. In the midst of doing his research on Cheswell, Alperin received a letter from a California woman named Sandy Bressler, whose husband is an 8th generation descendent of Wentworth Cheswell. She was looking to find out more about Cheswell's son, Thomas. As it turned out, Thomas, his wife, and his children are all buried in Riverside Cemetery; their monument stands tall, directly facing Alperin's old house on Elm Street. "I'm talking, directly straight across from us, about 80 feet," Alperin said incredulously.

Hooked on history

Alperin has learned quite a bit throughout this process. He was never one to be interested in history or research and he'd never done genealogical studies. "People probably wonder, 'Why are you doing this for a family that isn't even yours,'" Alperin said. "To research my own family, I'd need to go to Russia, England, Holland. (The Cheswells) were all here from the beginning." Alperin said he's also learned something about black history.

"I thought that all black people back then were slaves," he said. "But he was an individual who, beyond all thoughts and expectations, and could rise to the point that he rose to." Tuveson's thesis also spoke to that: "Light skin color, wealth, education and familiarity within his community helped prompt Wentworth Cheswell's individual success and caused his contemporaries to identify him as 'white.' Only in hindsight, after notions of race became more clearly defined in the United States, did politicians and scholars identify Cheswell as "black" and refer to him as "remarkable."

Alperin and Tuveson weren't the first to recognize Cheswell. PBS did a special many years ago called "Secret Daughter," which took a look at blurred racial lines of famous families. Cheswell was also the subject of a national accolade, which he received during a Congressional Debate in 1820 over the Missouri Compromise. Alperin explained that, in his address opposing the legislation that prevented "mulattos" from attaining Missouri citizenship, a New Hampshire senator noted, "In New Hampshire there was a man by the name of Cheswell, with his family, were respectable to the point of abilities, property and character. But this family are forbidden to enter and live in Missouri."

Alperin says genealogy has now become a sort of hobby for him. He plans to continue discovering the history of his home and land. "I've learned that the people of today need to realize that there's a yesterday we come from, and a tomorrow we're all going to," Alperin said. "We shouldn't forget about them."



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Grave of prominent 18th-century black resident to be restored

By Rachel Grace Toussaint news@seacoastonline.com

NEWMARKET - A local man's campaign to restore a historic grave site has earned a grant from the Portsmouth Black Heritage Trail Inc. For months, Rich Alperin has been telling people about the life and

achievements of Wentworth Cheswell - a prominent member of the community who lived from 1747 to 1817 - in hopes of ultimately restoring Cheswell's grave site, which is near Alperin's house on South Main Street, where Cheswell once lived. Alperin considers Cheswell, who is black, one of Newmarket's founding fathers. The grave, according to Alperin, has deteriorated.

Last weekend, during a benefit concert for the grave's restoration, PBHT president Valerie Cunningham presented Alperin with a \$500 check. According to Cunningham, the money will go to the Newmarket Historical Society's Cheswell Headstone Restoration Fund. Cunningham estimates Alperin will need \$3,000 for the restoration project.

"Rich called me a year or so ago and told me what he was doing," said Cunningham. "I was very impressed - and not only with the work he's doing and his enthusiasm. It's just the way he's been working to put the whole story together that has interested me. That's the kind of enthusiasm we love to see others have for history. I asked him if he'd come to a Trail board meeting to explain what he was doing. He came last winter, and everyone was very interested."

Cunningham said that although the PBHT is registered as a Portsmouth initiative, its interests go beyond the city limits. "We're always involved in the black history of the Seacoast area," she said. Interestingly, the Cheswell family does have connections to Portsmouth. "Hopetill Cheswell, Wentworth's father, was builder of several houses in Portsmouth, so there's a literal connection as well as the less obvious," Cunningham said.

Wentworth worked as a teacher in Newmarket, all the while playing an active role in the town. In 1768 he was elected town constable. "Between 1768 and 1817, every single year he served the town in some capacity, except for one year," said Alperin. "He was a selectman, an auditor, an assessor, a scrivener and a justice of the peace." Alperin says Cheswell's work as a scrivener was of particular benefit to Newmarket.

"At some point Cheswell realized that the town's handwritten records were in danger of disappearing, so he took a journal and hand-copied the town's records starting from their first meeting in 1727," said Alperin.

During the Revolutionary War, Cheswell was on the Committee of Safety. He served as a messenger, carrying messages back and forth between Newmarket and Exeter. "And just like Paul Revere made that famous midnight run from Boston to Lexington and Concord," said Alperin, "Cheswell made a midnight run back here from Boston to let people know that the British were coming."

What fascinates Cunningham is that Alperin is not a historian yet is deeply invested in preserving the history and grave site of Cheswell. "He just did it because he bought a house and was curious about the history of his house," she said. "And we wanted to help stimulate interest and cooperation for this project. It's a good project, and it's tied to black history of the state." According to Cunningham, the PBHT hasn't gotten as far as making Cheswell's home and grave site part of the trail, but does intend to draw people's attention to it nonetheless. "What we're doing already is pointing out that sites beyond site markers exist - other sites beyond the area of our walking tour," said Cunningham. "We are also presenting this as a challenge grant to challenge other historical societies - in Newmarket and others in the area - to support this effort," she added.

Graveyard to get TLC

April 28, 2006 By Peg Warner newsletter@seacoastonline.com

NEWMARKET - A rundown graveyard containing the remains of one of the town's most devoted early public servants has been the focus of restoration efforts, which will receive a boost next month.

Descendants of Wentworth Cheswill already have begun the work of at the burial ground beside Route 152, diagonally across from Newmarket Junior/Senior High School. Members of the New Hampshire Old Graveyard Association will lend their assistance during a work day on Saturday, May 20, to continue cleaning and repairing gravestones.

Cheswill, whose name also is sometimes spelled Cheswell, has become an object of fascination for Richard Alperin since he and his family moved to the property once owned by Cheswill. Their house, near the intersection of Route 152 and Packer's Falls Road, is the third to stand on Cheswill's original foundation. He also is petitioning the state to place a historic marker near the Cheswill graveyard.

Alperin, who also is president of the Newmarket Historical Society, has combined forces with descendants to flesh out and bring to life the story of Cheswill, a one-quarter black man and descendant of former slaves who, over the course of his adult life, held town posts including lot layer, clerk, moderator, selectman, auditor, coroner, and county justice of the peace. He served on the town's first School Board, according to Alperin, and along with four other men, incorporated the town's first library.

"He took a break, 1888, I think," said Alperin this week. "He didn't do anything." His name also turns up in a Revolutionary War account as performing a role likened to that of Paul Revere in carrying word inland of a crucial vote in 1775 to bolster the coastal city with additional soldiers as a British ship positioned itself offshore. "The guy was an absolutely incredible guy," said Alperin.

Yet his contributions had all but faded from town memory, according to Alperin, who is unsure why, but called it "a deplorable sin that any town could forget any many who dedicated his life to public service."

Work at the cemetery has begun, with several gravestones already cleaned and broken ones epoxied together. A replica of Cheswill's original marker, which is in the Historical Society museum, has been cast and stands alongside the original markers of other family members. Descendants also have cleared away several trees, with a couple more to go. The family patriarch, in fact, is recovering from injuries he received when one of the trees fell on him during one recent work session.

The NHOGA, an offshoot of the New Hampshire Historical Society, used to regularly clean up old cemeteries back in the 1970s, when it first formed. That activity later declined and was done only "off and on," said Richard Maloon, the group's treasurer, who is trying to revive it, with the Cheswill graveyard its first new project. Members of the NHOGA will work on May 20 beginning at 9:30 a.m. They don't need volunteers, but spectators are welcome.

"It's just more of a respect thing," said Krista Whitcomb of Somersworth, a 10th-generation granddaughter of Cheswill and the family genealogist, of the efforts to restore the family cemetery. The family, some of whom still live in Newmarket, was unaware of its heritage until sickle-cell anemia, a disease usually found in the black population and extremely rare in whites, turned up in her white-skinned family. Knowing Cheswill's history, she said, "explains a lot" about the family character. "Now we really see where the backbone and stuff have come from," said Whitcomb.