Transatlantic trade's souls remembered

Contributed by JOHN L. GUERRA
Last Updated Tuesday, 16 April 2013

KEY WEST — With windblown sea behind them and a deep blue sky above, participants recently paid tribute to Africans buried more than a century ago in the sand beneath their feet, as a Yoruba priestess poured water on the site where 295 tribal Congolese, victims of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, were buried in 1860.

The Africans died from dysentery and other diseases contracted in the holds of wet and cold slave ships during their journey across the Atlantic. U.S. Navy warships rescued 1,432 of them off the coast of Cuba — which wanted them to labor on sugarcane plantations — and brought them to Key West.

Though Key West quickly built a hospital, barracks and a kitchen to house, feed and revive the sick and dispirited people, 295 could not be saved.

After a time, the survivors returned to Africa aboard American ships out of New York, but were taken to Liberia, far from their traditional homeland in the Congo.

Monday, March 25 marked the United Nation's International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

The burial site in Key West is unique in the United States because it holds the bodies of Africans who had been captured but were not yet slaves, said Gene Tinnie, the artist who designed the large and colorful concrete field engineered to "float" just above the sand graves.

The African continent is seen on one side of the field and South Florida and Cuba are engraved on the other side. An etched design linking Africa with Florida and Cuba shows the path of the three slave ships that held the Africans: The Wildfire, William and Bogota.

Tinnie described how the Africans — a hierarchical tribal society with schools, communications, religion, writing and a long history of agriculture and building — were devastated by their captors. Captured in the Congo River Valley and other areas, and detained in coastal barracks on the West African coast, the human beings were sorted, inspected and labeled like any product, he said.

“They were fed just enough to keep them alive for sale. They were branded with the names of the purchaser, and inspected like livestock. They were put aboard ships naked and packed in tightly in the hold. When the person next to you in the hold got sick, you got sick, too.”

The shippers knew there would be deaths among the captured Africans during the voyage, which took two months or longer, but chalked it up to the cost of doing business.

Queen Catherine “Hummingbird” Ramirez, a Carib Indian priestess, opened the memorial service by burning sage in a bowl made of woven plants. She walked among the participants and onlookers, inviting them to let her cleanse their spirits with smoke from the burning sage. One by one, people stepped forward for the cleansing, including tourists who’d stopped to view the ceremony.

“The capture of these people is a sad story,” Ramirez said.” They didn’t know where they were going, they were blindfolded, then kidnaped. Theirs was a beautiful culture but they were warehoused by the ocean in Africa before being put on ships. I’ve seen the warehouses there. They are there as a reminder.”

The Yoruba princess Phyllis LeConce, dressed in white, poured water on the concrete above the graves as she declared an African prayer.

She then took a flask of gin, sipped from it and spit in an outward circle, providing sustenance to the souls of the departed.

Corey Malcom, director of archaeology at the Mel Fisher Maritime Museum in Key West, told the story of the Africans and the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

“Millions were shipped westward to America” he said. “The slave trade was declared illegal in the United States in 1808 and it was illegal for Americans to participate.

But in 1860, Cuba bought as many slaves as it could take. President Buchanan in 1859 ordered Navy steamships to intercept slave ships off Cuba.”

Once rescued, the people were brought to Key West, the nearest American port. The national press covered the event and Harper’s Weekly illustrated the lives in the barracks, dubbing one African woman a queen and relating the stories of the children in the barracks. Most later were sent by sail to Liberia, leaving 295 behind in the sand. None would ever see the hills and forests of the Congo River Valley again.

“Slavery is still going on in the world as we speak,” Tinnie told participants, underscoring the remembrance of the victims of slavery not only in Key West but around the world.