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3. Legacies of Slavery & Freedom: A Family Journey Through the Atlantic World

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1696 Heritage Group, Newport RI

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Legacies of Slavery & Freedom: A Family Journey Through the Atlantic World

Keith W. Stokes

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History is the collective memory of its entire people. African heritage people have contributed to the economic, social, educational and religious history of the world.

The 17th century would bring enormous changes to the Western Hemisphere encompassing North and South America, and the Caribbean, the area then commonly called the New World. European explorers and settlers would claim land for economic, sovereignty, political and religious reasons, but the common bond between nearly all was the use of enslaved Africans as the chief labor force to clear land, build cities and harvest the cash crops that would make men and communities wealthy beyond imagination.

“A Family Journey Though the Atlantic World” a lecture by Keith W. Stokes, Vice President of the 1696 Heritage Group in Newport, Rhode Island, USA offers to the audience an interactive program presenting the scholarly research and documentation that reconnects the 18th century Gold Coast with Jamaica, United Kingdom and the United States through the experiences of the descendants of an enslaved African-Jamaican boy, named October, aka Ottobah/Robert Barclay. This boy along with other men, women and children would be delivered from enslavement in Jamaica to freedom in America taking part in one of the most famous slave emancipation and reparation efforts in history in 1795. Robert Barclay is also Mr. Stokes maternal, great, great grandfather.

For over a two-century span of time and history, Robert Barclay’s family members were actively intertwined with the earliest African heritage places of worship, historic neighborhoods, masonic orders and political organizations as America’s cities evolve from early settlements into major economic and cultural centers. These cities include Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, with the largest free African heritage population in the Atlantic World and the first African Episcopal Churches in America; Bridgeport, Connecticut that would establish “Little Liberia” one of America’s

earliest free African and Native American settlements; and Newport, Rhode Island where the first African benevolent institution, the “Free African Union Society” would be organized in 1780. The presentation includes images of rare family heirlooms and documents from the Barclay family households dating back to the 18th century.

The lecture will conclude with a multimedia presentation of a historic African Burying Ground where Robert Barclay descendants are at rest. Before the American Revolution, Newport, Rhode Island was the largest and most active slave port in British North America. As part of that legacy, Newport is today home to a historically noteworthy burying ground that the African heritage community commonly called “God’s Little Acre.” Dating back to 1705, this section of Newport’s Common Burying Ground along Farewell Street has been recognized as containing the oldest and largest collection of original burial markers of enslaved and free Africans in America, many originating from the Gold and Guinea Coasts of West Africa.

