

Help Save Richmond's 'Burial Ground for Negroes'

How can a major public institution — a university, no less — justify maintaining a commercial parking lot on top of a cemetery? Worse yet, a cemetery that was the final resting place for people held in chattel slavery? People who are the ancestors of Black people living today in Richmond and across North America?

This is the situation with Richmond's "Burial Ground for Negroes," a more-than-200-year-old graveyard that today lies abandoned under a downtown parking lot owned by Virginia Commonwealth University. (See Site No. 13 in this brochure.)

It's not as if VCU isn't aware of the problem.

Some 25 years ago, Richmond historian Elizabeth Cann Kambourian found an old city map at the Library of Virginia that identified the Burial Ground. It also showed that this was the site of the town gallows, where, on Oct. 10, 1800, the great slave rebellion leader Gabriel was executed for the "crime" of attempting to lead a rebellion against slavery.

For years, Kambourian worked tirelessly to try and get city officials to take note of her discovery. Finally, in the spring of 2000, she spoke at the Black History Museum and Cultural Center of Virginia in Richmond's Jackson Ward. One of those present was Janine Bell of the Elegba Folklore Society, who invited Kambourian to make a presentation to Richmond City Council's official Slave Trail Commission. Since then, Elegba has included the Burial Ground in its Night Walk on the Trail of Enslaved Africans, part of its annual Juneteenth Celebration.

Slave Trail Commission founder Sa'ad El-Amin urged City Council to purchase the parking lot site and properly reclaim the cemetery. At that time, the land, owned by a Cincinnati real estate company, was assessed at \$600,000. Council ignored his request, and today the land is assessed at just under \$1.5 million.

In 2001, the Richmond Free Press printed the city's first article about the Burial Ground. (The story was written by staff reporter Phil Wilayto, now editor of *The Virginia Defender*.)

On Oct. 10, 2004, the Defenders' Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project unveiled a state highway marker at 15th and Broad streets commemorating Gabriel's execution and noting the existence of the Burial Ground. This was the city's first official physical recognition of the graveyard.

Enter VCU. In the summer of 2008, the university purchased the site, which sits next to its massive medical complex, to follow through with its plans to "upgrade" the 400-space parking lot. When local activists Shanna Merola and Kenneth Yates learned the upgrade was about to happen, they quickly called a public protest.

Caught in a public relations fiasco, VCU suspended its re-paving of the site and turned for help to another state institution, the Department of Historic Resources. The DHR came up with a "study" that conceded the Burial Ground's existence, but argued that almost all of it lies under adjacent Interstate 95.

In response, VCU offered to set aside a 50 x 110-foot sliver of the parking lot for use as a memorial.

Regrettably, the city's Slave Trail Commission (now under new leadership) accepted both the DHR's conclusions and VCU's offer.

However, the DHR study was subsequently examined by Dr. Michael Blakey, the former Howard University anthropologist and

lead researcher during the excavation of New York City's now-world-renowned African Burial Ground. Dr. Blakey currently directs the Institute for Historical Biology at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg and is an adviser to the Defenders' Sacred Ground project.

This is what Dr. Blakey found: to determine the boundaries of the buried graveyard, the DHR had simply drawn a box around the words "Burial Ground for Negroes" on a copy of the map Kambourian had discovered — and concluded that that box represented the graveyard's actual boundaries, making no recommendations for further investigation.

Dr. Blakey sent his review to the DHR, but never got a response. So the Defenders e-mailed the critique to every news media outlet in Virginia. (To view copies of the DHR report and Dr. Blakey's critique, log onto www.DefendersFJE.org.)

Once again, VCU was in trouble.

The Slave Trail Commission had promised to hold three community forums to discuss the issue, but it suspended the effort after the first hearing resulted in pitting Dr. Blakey's critique against the DHR report, raising questions about decisions about this important site were to be made.

Fast-forward to Aug. 3, when VCU moved ahead with its plans to repave the parking lot. In response, local activist organizations including the Virginia NAACP and its VCU chapter, the VCU student group *Afrikan*, Richmond Jobs with Justice, the Defenders and others held a press conference and protest on the site, alerting the community to this latest development.

Pressed by the media to respond, VCU spokesperson Pam Lepley again pointed to the DHR report as its justification for "repaving the part of the property that, according to the report, was probably not involved in the burial grounds."

"Probably" doesn't cut it. As Dr. Blakey pointed out in his critique, the only way to determine the actual boundaries of the Burial Ground is to conduct a physical excavation.

Until then, it is a desecration to continue to encourage people to park their cars on this Sacred Ground. And since VCU is the legal owner of the site — and knew about the existence of the Burial Ground before it bought the land, it is VCU's responsibility to pay for this excavation, which should be carried out in close consultation with Richmond's Black community.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

Please e-mail the following public officials and tell them you oppose VCU using the Burial Ground site as a parking lot until the actual boundaries of the graveyard can be determined, and that you support the development of Shockoe Bottom as a nonprofit Historical Tourism area, properly and respectfully memorializing all its history. (And please cc the Defenders.)

VCU President Michael Rao, PhD
president@vcu.org

Richmond Mayor Dwight C. Jones
dwight.jones@richmondgov.com

Virginia Gov. Timothy M. Kaine

www.governor.virginia.gov & click onto "Contact the Governor"



is packed into such a small area than Richmond's Shockoe Bottom.

Extending about eight blocks north from the James River, from Shockoe Hill to the west to Church Hill to the east, this former Indian trading area was where the City of Richmond was born.

Named for the creek that runs through Shockoe Valley, this was where, in 1782, Richmond's first government was formed and where, five years later, William Byrd II laid out its first city blocks.

Located here are the sites of Richmond's first Jewish synagogue and cemetery, its first Quaker Meeting House and its oldest existing house. Shockoe has the country's oldest Masonic Lodge and one of its oldest continuously used farmers' markets.

But undoubtedly the area's greatest significance is the fact that, for the three decades preceding the Civil War, it was, after New Orleans, the largest market for enslaved Africans in this country.

This was where many of the 300,000 to 350,000 men, women and children of African descent who were sold from Virginia to plantations in the Deep South were auctioned off.

This hugely profitable marketing of generations of human beings — accompanied by the forced separation of families, beatings, floggings, rapes and executions — constitutes one of the greatest horrors the world has ever known, one that should never be forgotten.

An Appeal to All People of Good Will:

The Case for Reclaiming Richmond's Shockoe Bottom

It would be hard to find another place in the United States where more history

At the same time, it is also a story of incredible courage. From Gabriel's Rebellion to the mass escape on the hijacked slave ship *Creole* to thousands of individual acts of rebellion, this continuous resistance to injustice is a tribute to the deep resilience of the human spirit.

That story holds the potential for Richmond to become an educational center of international significance, as well as a unique place for racial learning, reconciliation and healing.

Shockoe Bottom is truly Sacred Ground, a place that belongs to all Richmonders, all Virginians and all peoples throughout the world — especially those of West Africa, from where so many African-Americans can trace their ancestry.

Properly reclaimed and memorialized, with a museum, genealogy center, meditative park, visitors center, reconstructed historic buildings and, especially, the reclamation of the long-neglected and profoundly disrespected Burial Ground for Negroes, this small area could become one of the most visited Heritage Tourism sites in the country.

Or, we can ignore this rich and vital history and instead use the publicly owned property as a site for a commercial baseball stadium, another medical center or more condos, nightclubs and parking lots.

The Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality, a community organization based in Richmond, has prepared this brochure to help educate public officials as well as the public at large about what an irreplaceable treasure we have in Shockoe Bottom.

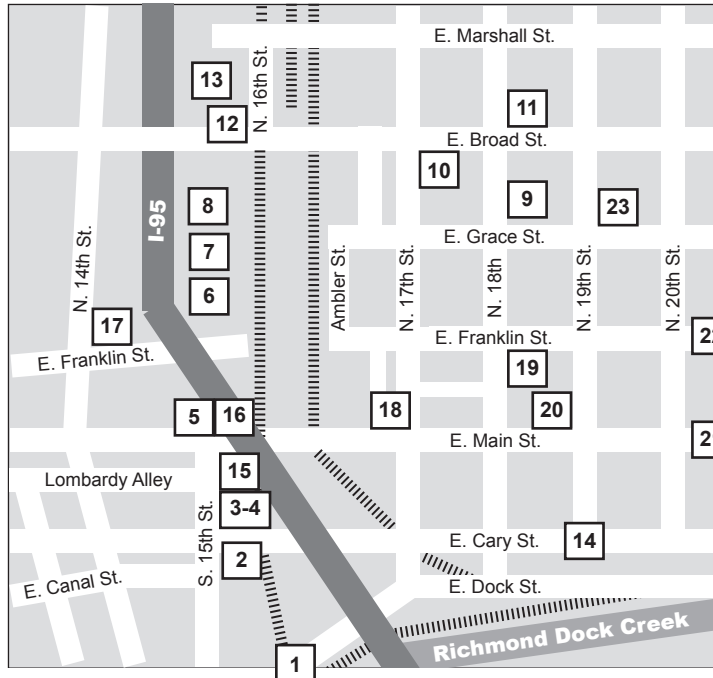
Please read, reflect and make a commitment to help reclaim Shockoe Bottom's history for us all.

Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project of the Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality

PO Box 23202, Richmond, VA 23223 - Phone: (804) 644-5834 - Fax: (804) 332-5225 - E-mail: DefendersFJE@hotmail.com - Web: www.DefendersFJE.org

(c) 2009 by Defenders Publications, Inc. Permission to reproduce in part or whole is granted as long as attribution is made.

SACRED GROUND HISTORICAL RECLAMATION PROJECT
of the Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality - Richmond, Virginia



Some Shockoe Bottom Historic Sites

1 - TRAIL OF ENSLAVED AFRICANS (Slave Trail)

This federally recognized Historic Landmark is a 1.3-mile walking trail between Shockoe Bottom and what was once the major port of Manchester Docks on the south bank of the James River. Before 1778, when Virginia banned participation in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, captured Africans brought to Richmond to be sold into slavery were forced to walk north along this trail to the slave jails in Shockoe Bottom – at night, so as not to offend the sensibilities of Richmond’s white residents. After U.S. participation in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade was banned in 1807 (the ban went into effect the following year), Virginia became one of the country’s major sources of forced labor for newly opened plantations in the Deep South. Now enslaved Black people were forced to walk from the jails and auction house of Shockoe Bottom south along this trail to the ships waiting at Manchester Docks. Many believe this is the origin of the phrase “sold down the river.” The Night Walk Along the Trail of Enslaved Africans is now part of the city’s annual Juneteenth Celebration, coordinated by the Elegba Folklore Society. Tours are also conducted by other Richmond organizations, as well as by the Richmond Department of Parks and Recreation.

2 - HENRY “BOX” BROWN MEMORIAL

Box Brown Plaza, 15th & Dock streets

Born into slavery in 1815 in Louisa County, Henry “Box” Brown escaped to freedom in 1849 by arranging to have himself sealed in a wooden box and shipped to an organization of abolitionists in Philadelphia. He took this desperate measure after his wife and children were sold to a North Carolina plantation.

3 - DAVENPORT & CO.

15th & E. Cary streets

A slave auction house. Portions of the building survived the Civil War and are now part of the present building. *City of Richmond Web site*

4 - ATKINSON JAIL

15th & Cary streets

A large jail complex, likely owned by George Washington Atkinson. *Jeffrey Ruggles, Virginia Historical Society, quoted in Style Weekly, 2/3/09*

5 - SLAVE TRADE RECONCILIATION STATUE

15 & E. Main streets

This statue, one of three identical structures symbolizing reconciliation between those oppressed by slavery and those responsible for it, was unveiled in March 2007 before a crowd of more than 5,000. Dignitaries from around the world addressed the crowd, illustrating the international importance of Richmond’s Shockoe Bottom. The other two statues are in Liverpool, England, and Benin, West Africa. Together they memorialize the British, African and U.S. triangular trade. “Profits from the sale of enslaved Africans financed major British and North American economic development.” *Plaque at the Richmond site, erected by the Commonwealth of Virginia and the City of Richmond*

6 - SLAVE AUCTION HOUSES

Along 15th Street

“Some 40 or 50 slave dealers plied their trade in this ‘specialized’ neighborhood. The dealers and auction houses were concentrated between 14th and 18th streets, with the heart of the district along 15th Street from Shockoe Slip to Marshall Street, on the north side of Broad.” *“Locus of Sorrow” by Richmond historian Elizabeth Cann Kambourian, The Richmond Defender, 2/05*

7 - LUMPKIN’S JAIL

15th & Franklin streets

Owned by the notorious slave dealer Robert Lumpkin, this complex was the largest antebellum slave trade site outside New Orleans. It consisted of “holding pens,” plus a restaurant and hotel for visiting dealers. Known as the “Devil’s Half-Acre,” the complex was also used as a place for breaking rebellious slaves. Robert Lumpkin died shortly after the Civil War and the property was inherited by Mary Anne Lumpkin, his wife and one of his former slaves, who leased it to a Baptist minister looking for a space in which to start a Black seminary. That was the origin of what is now Virginia Union University. A 2008 excavation of the original site revealed the complex’s intact foundation, attracting international attention and a major article in the magazine of the Smithsonian Institute. The survey that led to the excavation was sponsored by the City of Richmond, the Richmond Slave Trail Commission, the Virginia Department of Historic Resources and the preservationist organization A.C.O.R.N. After the excavation, the site was covered with a tarp and landfill and now awaits funding for its proper restoration.

8 - WINFREE COTTAGE

(Not yet located in Shockoe Bottom)

This two-room cottage once belonged to Emily Winfree, a free Black woman formerly owned by a wealthy Manchester landowner by whom she had five children. In 2002, A.C.O.R.N. saved the cottage after learning it was to be demolished. Current plans are for it to be used as a visitor’s

information site along the Trail of Enslaved Africans.

A.C.O.R.N. Web site

9 - ASH HOUSE

211 N. 18th St.

Home of Ash Levy, slave trader and seller of clothing to the slave auction trade. *Kim Chen, quoted in Style Weekly, 2/3/09*

10 - OMOHUNDRO SLAVE JAIL

17th & E. Broad streets

Operated by Silas Omohundro, a slave trader. Now the site of an Exxon gas station. *Style Weekly, 2/3/09; Library of Virginia*

11 - SLAVE TRADER OFFICE

1800 E. Broad St. (Parking lot next to McDonald’s)

One of many trader offices in the area. *Style Weekly, 2/3/09*

12 - “EXECUTION OF GABRIEL” MARKER

North side of E. Broad Street, between I-95 and CSX tracks

This state highway marker commemorates the execution of the great slave rebellion leader Gabriel on Oct. 10, 1800. The marker was erected by the Virginia Department of Historic Resources after a community campaign conducted by the Defenders. Unveiled on the 204th anniversary of Gabriel’s execution, it was also the first official recognition of the nearby Burial Ground for Negroes.

13 - BURIAL GROUND FOR NEGROES

Just north of East Broad Street, between the entrance to I-95 and the CSX railroad tracks

First used as a cemetery sometime in the 18th century, this was once the final resting place for enslaved Africans, executed criminals and the indigent. It also included the city gallows, where Gabriel was executed on Oct. 10, 1800. The Burial Ground was evidently used until the first of a group of Black cemeteries in Barton Heights opened around 1814. The Broad Street property then changed hands many times. In the 1930s it was used as the city’s dog pound. Today the property is owned by Virginia Commonwealth University, a public institution, which uses the site as a commercial parking lot. **(Please see back page for information on the struggle to reclaim the Burial Ground.)**

14 - QUAKER MEETING HOUSE

19th & Cary streets

The Richmond Friends Meeting was organized in 1795 and soon built its first Meeting House. This was the second oldest church in Richmond. *Richmond Friends Web site*

15 - SOUTHERN LITERARY MESSENGER OFFICE SITE

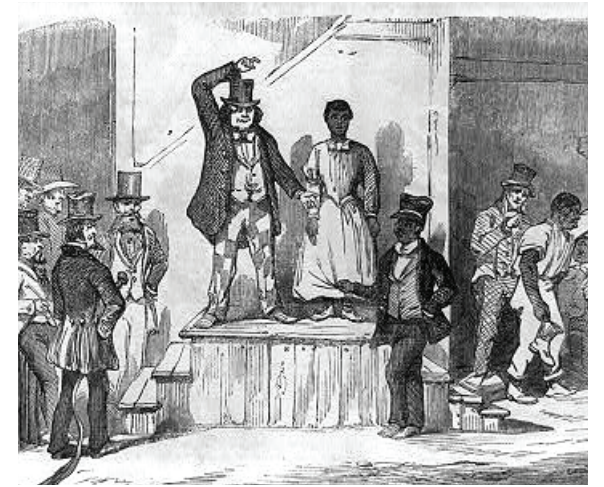
15th & Main streets

A publication edited for a time by Edgar Allan Poe.

16 - MAIN STREET STATION

1500 E. Main St.

This French Renaissance-style station opened in 1901. Closed in 1975, it reopened to passenger train service in 2003 after a \$51.6 million station renovation. However, because of rail congestion north of the city, most travelers prefer the station at Staples Mill Road. \$51.6 million. And the city says it can’t find \$1.5 million to reclaim the Burial Ground.



Richmond Slave Auction, Illustrated London News, 1856

17 - KAHAL KADOSH SHALOME MARKER

14th & E. Franklin streets

The “Holy Congregation House of Peace” was the first Jewish congregation in Virginia and the sixth established in the United States. Its first permanent synagogue, at 115 Mayo St., was dedicated on Sept. 15, 1822. www.dhr.virginia.gov/contents/hwmarker_month_content.htm

18 - 17TH STREET FARMERS’ MARKET

17th & East Main streets

Wares have been sold here continuously since about 1770.

19 - MASON’S HALL

1805-1807 E. Franklin streets

Dating from 1785-87, this is the oldest Masonic lodge in the United States and one of the oldest continuously used Masonic lodges in the world. <http://www.nps.gov/history>

20 - POE MUSEUM

1914 E. Main St.

The oldest house in Richmond, this stone building now houses a museum dedicated to the 19th century writer Edgar Allan Poe, who lived in Richmond for a time.

21 - FORMATION OF RICHMOND’S 1ST CITY GVT

2127 E. Main St.

“On July 2, 1782, the people of Richmond gathered near this site to elect twelve citizens and constitute their first city government, known as the Common Hall.” *State Historical Marker at the site*

22 - FRANKLIN STREET BURIAL GROUNDS

N. 21st & E. Franklin streets

Founded in 1791, this was the first Jewish cemetery in Virginia. It is maintained by the Congregation Beth Ahabah.

23 - KNESSET HOUSE

209 19th St.

One of Richmond’s first synagogues, built by a congregation of Orthodox Russians and Poles. *Valetine Museum*