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 and used to house a 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. 18, 1860, the great slave rebellion leader Gabriel was executed for the “crime” of attempting to lead a rebellion against the Confederates.

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 Richmond Museum of History and Natural Science, 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 Afri-
cans, part of its annual Juneteenth Celebration.

Slave Trail Commission founder Sa’di El-Amir 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 $860,000. Council ignored his request, and today the property is 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 Willie and by Richmond City's Virginia Frederick.)

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 not-
ing 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 Shamea Merola and Kenneth Yates learned the up-
grade was about to happen, they quickly called a public protest.

Cape in the Burial Ground site as a parking lot, the university used VCU’s permit to suspend its re-
peving 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 existence of the site, but argued that almost all of it lies under adjacent Interstate 95.

In response, VCU offered to set aside a 50 x 110-foot slice 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 world-renowned African Burial Ground. Dr. Blakey currently directs

sacred ground historic reclamation project of the defenders for freedom, justice & equality

Please e-mail the following public officials and tell them you oppose the VCU plan to use the Burial Ground site as a parking lot and that you support the development of Shockoe Bottom as a nonprofit Historical Trail Ground, properly and respectfully memorializing all its history. (And please cc the Defenders.)

VCU President Michael Rao, PhD

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

Virginia Gov. Timothy M. Kaine

government.virginia.gov and click onto “Contact the Governor”

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

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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. Today, 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.”

2 - HENRY “BOX” BROWN MEMORIAL At 15th & Franklin streets, 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 Sorrows) by Virginian Elizabeth Cann Kambournik, The Richmond Defender, 2005

3 - DAVENPORT & CO. 15th & 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 Akinson, Jeffrey Ruggles, Virginia Historical Society, quoted in Style Weekly, 2/3/09

5 - SLAVE TRADE RECONCILIATION SCULPTURE 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. contributions to 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

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 Acorn, in 1857, this former slave holder 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 Institution. The survey that led to the excavation was sponsored by the City of Richmond, the Richmond Slave Trade Commission, the Virginia Department of Historic Resources and the preservationist organization A.C.O.R.N. A 2008 excavation of 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 90-year-old relative bought the cottage after learning it was to be demolished. Current plans are for the site 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 railroad tracks First used as a cemetery sometime in the 18th century, this was one of the final resting place for enslaved Africans, executed criminals and the indifferent. 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. For information on the struggle to reclaim the Burial Ground.

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

14 - QUAKER MEETING HOUSE 1501 S. 15th St. Home of Ash Levy, slave trader and seller of clothing to the slave auction trade.

15 - SOUTHERN LITERARY MESSENGER OFFICE SITE 15 & E. Main 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

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.

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.diva.virginia. gov/contents/hmmarker_month_content.htm

18 - 17TH STREET FARMERS’ MARKET 17th & East Main streets

19 - MASON’S HALL 1805-1807 E. Franklin streets Dating from 1783-87, 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 GV'T 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

23 - KNESSET HOUSE 209 19th St.

Richmond Slave Auction, Illustrated London News, 1856

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Wares have been held here continuously since about 1770.

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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