

# “They Had Perfect Knowledge of...This Offensive Place”: Burial Grounds and Archaeological Human Remains in Richmond’s Public Discourse

Ellen Chapman  
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## Introduction

In the United States generally, the discovery or potential discovery of human remains looms large in people’s minds when they think about archaeology. In a 2000 Harris poll performed by SAA, 18% of respondents thought of bones or digging up bones as soon as archaeology was mentioned (Ramos and Duganne 2000). This paper explores some reflections and attitudes towards archaeological human remains and burial places in the city of Richmond, where several recent high profile projects have developed out of strong community feelings about these subjects. Fundamental to these projects and events have been grassroots community activism and an attempt by individuals and organizations to secure basic respect, recognition, and restoration of burial grounds and human remains long known about but unmemorialized. Also essential for understanding the debates and narratives around these sites is a wider understanding of how race, historic preservation, and major city institutions have become perceived in the city’s political and social spheres over the past forty years – in some cases, it is the actions or inaction of particular groups in the city which combines with the unique significance of human burial places and bones to create flashpoints around city burial places.

## Methods

This research is currently ongoing, and is an element of my larger dissertation research project which conducts a large timescale analysis of Richmond’s archaeology and its potential

value to local communities. As part of this project, I have conducted 29 semi-structured ethnographic interviews, participated in public events associated with or tangential to subjects related to human remains in the city, like the East Marshall Street Well Project, East End Cemetery Clean Up and Restoration Project, and commemorative events held at the African Burial Ground. My interviews so far have been conducted with individuals somehow connected with history, archaeology, and community activism around these topics in the city, and I have also used snowballing to have new potential interview subjects recommended to me. [Slide presenting human remains questions] Participants are asked about archaeology and history in the city in a variety of ways, and several questions have addressed human remains generally or particular debates around human remains in the city. Additionally, conversations have been tailored to the experiences of each person interviewed and what I have known about their vantage points on these issues.

In synthesizing and analyzing the ethnographic information I am collecting, this paper focuses on three important sites involving human remains and burial grounds in the city: the reclaimed African Burial Ground (historically named the Burial Ground for Negroes), the East Marshall Street well from which dissected human remains were recovered, and the Virginia State Penitentiary burials.

### African Burial Ground

The African Burial Ground, originally named the Burial Ground for Negroes, was the first cemetery established for free and enslaved blacks in Richmond, and was used roughly between 1750 and 1816 (Blakey and Turner 2008). After the location of the site was relocated on an 1810 map in the 2000s, it became the focus of community activism opposing the site's use by

VCU as overflow parking for its medical school and hospitals. Protestors carried out numerous actions on the site, especially between 2008 and 2011. This activism culminated in the arrest of four people after they blocked entrance to the parking lot, and eventually VCU and Richmond City caved, the city purchased the property, and it became a site along the Richmond Slave Trail. Although no human remains have been archaeologically investigated on the site, and indeed the site was recorded with the Department of Historic Resources before any archaeological testing was performed, the potential and significance of this space has strongly impacted views of archaeology and human remains in the city. The strong interest in the space can be seen through a dispute regarding the full extent of the burial ground that prompted a report by the Department of Historic Resources, an unsolicited response report from Michael Blakey at the William & Mary Institute for Historical Biology, a documentary filmed by black VCU psychology professor Shawn Utsey, and several lawsuits demanding archaeological testing by a representative of the city NAACP (Hong 2013). Though support for archaeological investigations on the burial ground is weak and the question is controversial, in cases where such investigations are supported the rationale has generally been to prove the burial ground's exact location and extent or to use human remains to understand the conditions of slavery in early Richmond. This site has become the focus of several community ceremonies, such as Ancestor Day, Emancipation Day, and a ceremony recognizing the life and death of Gabriel, the leader of a slave rebellion put to death on the site in 1800. Attitudes towards the burial ground vary somewhat between the predominantly white historians and archaeologists I've interviewed so far and the black and white community members whose activism helped remove the asphalt. While community members and activists were likely to emphasize the need for greater care and city support for protecting and enhancing the site, it seems that some white historic professionals think that focus

on the site is less than warranted, and believe that the extent of the ground ceded to the city vastly exceeded the actual burial ground site, that many of the burials were under I-95 or destroyed by river erosion, or that the bodies are not likely to have survived given taphonomic conditions.

### East Marshall Street Well Project

In 1994, a well containing human remains, personal effects, and medical tools was discovered during the excavation of the Kontos Medical Sciences Building on Marshall Street. The well was predominantly excavated using construction equipment due to time pressures and safety concerns, and the archaeologists called to salvage the bones were given just a weekend for bone retrieval and recording. Since the well extended below the water table, it is likely that additional dissected remains were entombed beneath the building foundation. The bones have evidence of dissection and autopsy cuts, and were sent to the Smithsonian where they were identified as predominantly African-American (Owsley and Bruwelheide 2012). Understandably, this site has been the focus of considerable community anger, particularly in light of a documentary (Until the Well Runs Dry: Medicine and the Exploitation of Black Bodies) produced by VCU Psychology Professor Shawn Utsey about the site in 2011. As a result of community activism, the VCU President's Office is currently in the process of a community-engaged commemoration process, called The East Marshall Street Well Project, that will determine the future reburial process, directions for future research, and appropriate ways for VCU to mitigate their actions in relation to this site. Prior to this resurgence of interest, the remains were left at the Smithsonian and no bioarchaeological report was completed for them.

The overall reaction to the events leading to the dead bodies in the well, from academics and scholars as well as community members, is one of horror. In one characteristic quote, a black female museum professional described the situation as “horrific. And no grand surprise, but it’s a horrific thing. If nothing else it just brings to light another level of disgrace and trauma imposed upon black people.” This sense of horror was mirrored by the archaeologists most directly involved in the mitigation of the site, though white scholars and professionals were in general more remote and detached in how they discussed the implications of the site. “At the time I was disgusted, because people when the information started coming out and it became obvious that it was mainly African-American, I mean, I heard educated people say ‘well, that’s not important. That’s just 19th century. That doesn’t count.’ And I don’t think- I know in one case it was very racist and consciously racist, but I think more typically it was like ‘well, it’s not like somebody went and looted a cemetery that had been maintained, and there were stones, and flowers placed there.’”

### Virginia State Penitentiary

Finally we have human remains recovered from the site of the former state penitentiary overlooking the banks of the James River, which on its face has some similarities with the East Marshall Street Well Project. The land was sold to a chemical company in the 1990s, and archaeological investigations were carried out as part of the land sale and ensuing development. In winter of 1992, after archaeological investigations had investigated intact foundations of the 1800 Latrobe-designed penitentiary, construction disturbed a large collection of comingled human remains which was expanded to reveal 110 single inhumations and many features containing disturbed or disarticulated bones. [Slide of field map]. After their removal, the bones

were sent to the Smithsonian for analysis but a report was never completed, either for the skeletal analysis or the analysis of fieldwork and grave goods.

In some cases, during interviews participants shared feelings that the bones from the Penitentiary should have similar disposition to bones from the East Marshall Street well, but this was expressed with a great deal less outrage than feelings regarding the repaving of the African Burial Ground or the way in which VCU ignored the bones from the well. One respondent suggested that perhaps there was less sympathy for people believed to be criminals, but for others the status of the East Marshall St Well as an inherently unjust situation from the beginning made the situations distinct. One middle class black activist said, “Well, the Penitentiary remains make sense to me. That’s where you live or die, if you were a prisoner or if you worked there. The well remains were stolen people.” While I have had many enthusiastic conversations about the importance of the site and the significance of the archaeological remains and documents for doing historical work interpreting the origins of the penal system and mass incarceration, and despite the high awareness among the groups canvassed about the connection between slavery, the prison system, and the origins of Jim Crow, the unheralded skeletons from the Penitentiary seem to be missing some of the raw emotion so clearly connected with the East Marshall Street well.

### Values Expressed Regarding Human Remains and Burial Grounds in Richmond

Particularly within the context of the last ten years, perceptions regarding archaeology in Richmond have been heavily influenced by opinions and values related to human skeletons, burial places, and exhumation of bones. To consider how value and values intersects with human remains in the city, I draw on the work of Kathryn Samuels at University of Maryland, who

considers value theories by anthropologists David Graeber and Weiner in relation to heritage and heritage management (Samuels 2008). This perspective describes value being created substantially through the investment of actions (Graeber 2001, 47–53; Munn 1986). With reference to the value of archaeological human remains and burial places in Richmond, this means to me that value is created and expressed through activities and advocacy associated with these sites. And that is concerning, in a context where as I have described, archaeological sites and human remains have remained incomplete or untouched for decades before the investment of considerable community time and protest to lobby city officials and execute activist actions. My ongoing ethnographic analysis shows reactions towards human remains to be closely tied with historical and contemporary racial and class inequalities, and they are particularly linked with perceptions of respect and disrespect towards the people and communities represented by these remains. One common thread – reclaiming and acknowledging the humanity of the enslaved and free Africans represented by these remains – is a clear and strong impetus that has influenced particularly active community members in how they have advocated for the Burial Ground and Marshall Street well remains. Additionally, however, two particular aspects of human remains tend to figure into their perceived value significantly: the use of archaeological human remains as a source of forensic proof regarding black populations and histories in the city, and the consideration of the use of human remains as a barometer of institutional approaches to the worth of black lives.

A concept of archaeological material as potential “evidence” or “truth” identifies one aspect of what some Richmond residents perceive as the value of archaeological research, which is as a positivist and forensic revealing of inequalities in the city. Fellow William & Mary anthropology alumna Autumn Barrett’s ethnography of activists involved in the struggle to

reclaim the African Burial Ground has revealed another way in which Richmonders valued historical accounts of the enslaved man Gabriel, who orchestrated a substantial slave revolt in 1800. According to Barrett, a number of her participants emphasized the impact that a more candid appraisal of history could have today, particularly in terms of encouraging Richmond's black youth to see themselves as descendants of people who actively resisted enslavement (Barrett 2014). In my own conversations with community members and historical scholars, this interest in revealing intentionally hidden histories and in making manifest historical truths was a major thread running through many conversations, with no particular emphasis from any one demographic or philosophical orientation.

Another major trend within Richmond's racially-charged history around preservation and social justice is its extensive entanglement with other political struggles and perceptions of the city's landscape of power. During conversations regarding what has gone wrong at the burial ground, and what was objectionable about bones being removed from the well in the 1990s, one constant is concern or outrage regarding what is often characterized as intentional institutional silences in the city. This might be in regards to VCU's expansion into the historical black Carver neighborhood, or the VCU relocation of the house of a Quaker abolitionist without thorough archaeological review. Similarly, city organizations like the Slave Trail Commission or the city parks department are the target of criticism regarding the standard of care employed for some black cemeteries, like Barton Heights, a city-owned black cemetery that until recent years was almost entirely untended. As one white historian put it, "It's interesting that the nexus is never quite made between [the fact that the Penitentiary human remains went to the Smithsonian] and the way we treat black cemeteries in Richmond. Which is appalling." Many black activists and scholars pointed to their own VCU ties as a reason why they felt they had to speak up about the



African Burial Ground and well remains issues, because in some sense they would have felt complicit in the decisions made by VCU if they stood by silently. Though the boogiemans shifts from one situation to another, it is clear that the institutional actors involved in a potential cover up or legal or moral culpability really connects the issue of human burial grounds and remains with the city's wider political landscape. This use of human remains as a bellwether for social respect and for a voice in community decision making has a long history in the city – in 1810, a freed black man called Christopher McPherson petitioned the city to replace the burial ground, which was reaching capacity and suffered several incursions from Shockoe Creek. His letter read in part, “Notwithstanding they had perfect knowledge of the situation of this offensive place, the rulers of the city had taken up out of her grave, last spring, a woman, a poor widow, the second day after she was buried, in her own bona fide ground on an eminence, and carried down to this mock of a grave yard” (McPherson 1810). The burial grounds and skeletons of Richmond have long been a beacon to the much greater social inequalities underlying them, and is one reason why these spaces have in recent decades become such tinderboxes for local institutions and cities. Generally in the city now, there is general enthusiasm for the East Marshall Street well process, as yet unfinished, to decide on a disposition for the individuals whose bodies were recovered in 1994. Time will tell whether this process represents real change, and whether it will allow the empowerment of city communities in regards to similar struggles over history and burial spaces.

Last slide quote: “I think it’s a wonderful movement. I don’t know if I have any faith at all in VCU anything but what seems like the right thing for VCU at the time. Lord knows the community has been involved in it. So we’ll see.”

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