

Shockoe Bottom: Changing the Landscape of Public History in Richmond, Virginia

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Drive east on Broad Street in Richmond, Virginia from downtown. Pass the Egyptian Building and you'll quickly head down a steep hill toward the traffic light at 17th Street-Oliver Hill Way, which in 1737 was the westernmost street in the original 32-block grid of the city. Continue on up to Church Hill on Broad Street to St. John's Church, where Patrick Henry famously gave his "Give me liberty or give me death!" speech in 1775. You won't miss it: signs and historic markers point the way, the church is easily seen and beautifully maintained. There's a website, too.

Now, turn around and look back down the hill into Shockoe Bottom, formerly known as Shockoe Valley. Until it was encased in a concrete tunnel in the 1920s, Shockoe Creek ran through that valley and emptied into the James River. From your car you probably won't have noticed that by the time you got to Oliver Hill Way you had already passed the entrance to a cemetery for the African people of early Richmond, where, in 1800 a twenty-four-year-old enslaved blacksmith named Gabriel, of the Prosser plantation, and many of his fellow freedom fighters were hanged for organizing and planning a rebellion to end slavery.

You also won't find a sign marking the way to the Lumpkin's Jail archaeological site - a slave-trading complex known as the "Devil's half-acre" that operated from the 1840s through the end of the Civil War - until you get there. There is no sign explaining why the crumbling 19th century cottage of formerly enslaved woman named Emily Winfree, stands abandoned to the elements on blocks nearby. There's nothing to indicate that Richmond's Shockoe Bottom was second in scope only to New Orleans in the domestic trade in enslaved humans for the 30 years leading up to start of the

Civil War in 1861, that this valley was filled with traders, jails, brokers, merchants and suppliers for the daily life of a slave society, that more than 300,000 people were sold out of Virginia in that period, most of them from Richmond.

For 13 years, the Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality have insisted that Richmond's invisible and devalued Black history must now be understood, made public and honored. How else can we understand our present-day society if we don't know all that it took to create it? How can we know what not to repeat? And to remember that which had to be overcome?

We started with public forums and the installation of the historical highway marker to show that "Prosser's Gabriel" was a hero in the struggle for liberation right here in Richmond, and that he died on the town gallows in a burying ground that had since become an interstate highway and a parking lot. We next launched the "Gabriel Forum" - an annual commemoration, *The Virginia Defender* newspaper, a nine-year weekly radio show, and the Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project - a grassroots campaign to reclaim the Richmond's "African Burial Ground".

When we started back in 2002, most people you might have asked about Gabriel's rebellion or the burial ground in Shockoe Bottom wouldn't have had any idea what you were talking about. Now site's 3.1 acres off 16th and Marshall streets have become more commonly known. Lumpkin's Jail became world-renowned after the Smithsonian magazine published a story about the archaeological discovery of the footings of every building in Robert Lumpkin's notorious operation, including the two-story jail for holding the enslaved for sale and breaking the spirits of rebellious slaves.

By now, few in Richmond are not familiar with the community struggle to prevent a baseball stadium from being built in the Bottom. In 2014 the area was nationally recognized as an endangered historic site and we could make the case for historic preservation precisely because of what was learned during the campaign to reclaim the burial ground -- by reading, and studying the work of earlier researchers and maps in order to understand the city's evolution from one of William Byrd's

plantations in the 1690s to becoming the capital of the “colony and dominion” of Virginia in 1780, and of the Confederate States of America in 1861.

We need to add to what is known and amplify what isn't known well enough. Richmond's leading role in U.S. domestic trafficking in human labor -- how long it went on; how profitable it was; the creation of the construct of race and false hierarchies to justify enslaving African people; the economic capital only made possible through the industry of the enslaved; the “peculiar institution” that led to the Civil War and its aftermath; virulent segregation policies; Jim Crow laws; eugenics; lynchings; economic deprivations; and divisions between Black and white that are at the heart of some of today's most damaging social problems -- can no longer be sloughed off.

In some ways, the history's very invisibility is what makes the area so compelling. The African Burial Ground was not known in the late 19th and 20th century because it was already gone -- filled in with tons of soil in part so that Broad Street could finally connect Capitol Hill to Church Hill. The story of Gabriel's Rebellion must be told by tour guides and handbooks because no building or artifact from the remarkable events in which he and his fellow conspirators participated remains. Once we know the story, though, our conscience knows this history matters. This area of Richmond is rightly considered endangered by Preservation Virginia, a national treasure by the National Trust for Historic Places, and a world site of conscience by the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience.

Walk the original 1737 streets of Richmond, look up towards the 1775 spot where Patrick Henry spoke so passionately about the value of liberty, then turn and look the other way, toward the spot where 25 years later a young Black man gave his life in pursuit of liberty. Walk to the place of businesses of large-scale slave traders Robert Lumpkin and Silas Omohundro, both of whom took formerly enslaved women for their wives. Stand where Chaplain Garland H. White of the U.S. Colored Troops was reunited with his mother on April 3, 1865 -- Richmond's Emancipation Day -- after having been sold away 20 years earlier.

If you drive around the city, you see whose values have been honored to this point, and therefore whose images have represented “us” to the world. It’s just not enough. Richmond’s story is incomplete. By giving priority to historic discovery and preservation, to places steeped in both pain and resistance, we face our worst and best selves. In Shockoe Bottom, reclamation of the history itself will be accomplished if we can claim and secure the actual sites as well, turned, we hope, into a memorial park with commemorative monuments and interpretive centers.

Inasmuch as the United Daughters of the Confederacy, and ultimately the state of Virginia, decided in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that they needed Richmond’s urban landscape to reflect and enshrine the “Lost Cause” narrative, so do I -- a daughter of Enslaved Africans (and European-American slave owners and Indians forcibly moved westward) now living in this most historic city -- feel the time has come to see the public landscape of Richmond reflect and commemorate the 300-year narrative of my people as well.

In another example -- With the controversial placement of a memorial to tennis champion Arthur Ashe on Richmond’s Monument Avenue, Richmonders at long last publicly marked a discomfort with their city’s Confederate self-portrait. From the moment of its unveiling the Ashe memorial became a pivot point in the conversation about race and power and control of the public landscape. When people finally understand that Ashe fought against racism on the court here as well as on behalf of Black people in South Africa, then his memorial’s location on Monument Avenue will have new poignancy, and reveal new truths.

The awareness and appreciation for the role of archaeology in support of historic claims in the public realm has grown significantly in recent years. Because of some of the more high profile excavations like New York’s African Burial Ground and Richmond’s Lumpkin’s Jail, popular film and television programming, as well as the pace with which social media allows the sharing of such activity from around the world, the general public has become familiar with the evidentiary potential

that archaeology presents when applied to inquiries of all kinds. Abuses and oversimplifications notwithstanding, this could mean a very interesting and productive era for the field. When local media began to publicize the public cry for “Why NOT do the archaeology?!” in relation to Shockoe Bottom, and a new organization, RVA Archaeology formed from lay and professional members to “expand the public’s awareness and enjoyment of Richmond’s rich heritage of archaeological resources and to advocate for their discovery, protection and interpretation”, we knew times were changing!

In fact, Richmond is changing, showing itself to be ripe for plucking the myriad voices, mechanisms and places that have been missing or dismissed as irrelevant to its development and its identity out of obscurity. With the reclamation of the African Burial Ground in Shockoe Bottom, Richmonders acknowledged the assertions of the Black community that its historic role in the city’s evolution must become visible and tangible. Confronting the current public history landscapes helps us question, interpret and mark the human and social needs and aspirations of the present.

Artists, educators, historians, preservationists, anthropologists, archaeologists, sociologists, biologists, chemists, forensic specialists, economists (lay and professional), cultivated from our historically marginalized communities and ethnicities, need to and in fact are stepping forward, often alongside community activists, adding their vision and intellect to the evolution of public history as a priority in our urban landscapes, and economic development. The long overdue value added by these subjective observers, chroniclers and interpreters of our historic and social resources cannot be overstated.