

## **Archaeology and Public Memory at the Lumpkin's Slave Jail Site**

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By any measure, the Lumpkin's Slave Jail Site in Richmond's Shockoe Bottom neighborhood is an exceptional place. Where else is preserved, virtually intact, the remains of a mid-nineteenth-century commercial and residential slave-trading complex deep beneath a busy, modern cityscape? Where else does a buried historic landscape at once embody the routine indignities of buying and selling human beings that marked the antebellum slave trade, but also the bold efforts of newly emancipated African Americans to uplift themselves through education? Where else do archaeological findings inspire the mayor of a major American city to launch a comprehensive public engagement initiative to give citizens a voice in determining how a site and its complex legacy should be interpreted and memorialized? And where else does such a project spark an impassioned debate among civic leaders, preservationists, and community activists—not about whether these efforts are warranted, but rather about how the scale of such an undertaking must be great enough to express the magnitude of the historical injustice and suffering which characterized not just one place, but an entire city district.

Over the past decade, I have had the unique opportunity to direct two archaeological investigations of the Lumpkin's Slave Jail site with the James River Institute for Archaeology, and most recently have participated in Mayor Dwight C. Jones' public engagement effort known as "Richmond Speaks." The archaeological project first began in 2005 as an initiative of Richmond City Council's Slave Trail Commission, an

organization then in the process of developing an historical walking trail to interpret and publicize the crucial role that Richmond played in the antebellum slave trade.

At the time, few Richmonders were aware that, in the decades before the Civil War, their city had been the principal hub for the mass relocation of hundreds of thousands of enslaved men, women, and children from Virginia and Maryland to the booming cotton plantations of the Lower South. The city's Shockoe Bottom area, a rough-and-ready mixed-use neighborhood in the low-lying Shockoe River Valley, became the focal point of this commerce, with scores of established and itinerant dealers working out of auction houses, hotels, slave jails, and other facilities that supported the lucrative, if somewhat disreputable, trade.

After acquiring a pre-existing slave-trading facility on Shockoe Bottom's Wall Street in 1844, Robert Lumpkin emerged as one of Richmond's most active and nefarious dealers. "Lumpkin's Jail," as it came to be known, was a compact urban complex that included his own two-story brick residence, a boardinghouse where he accommodated his clientele, a free-standing kitchen, and the notorious "jail" itself, a secure facility where he housed enslaved people prior to their sale.

Lumpkin's Jail was well known at the time, frequently described by curious visitors who came seeking a glimpse of the South's "peculiar institution." Anthony Burns' widely-read account of his four-month ordeal in the jail after being captured and returned to Virginia under the Fugitive Slave Law offers the most damning portrayal of this daunting place, where he was locked in a suffocating third-floor attic, while the sobs of women stripped naked for inspection wafted up through the floorboards.

Given the misery that had characterized this site, the subsequent history of the jail was truly remarkable. After his death, Lumpkin's estate passed to his widow, Mary, an African-American woman who had formerly been his slave. In 1867, Mary leased the former slave-trading complex to Reverend Nathaniel Colver, a Baptist minister from Chicago who had recently arrived in Richmond to establish a religious school for freed slaves. Colver moved into Lumpkin's house, and taught classes in the former jail after removing the bars from the windows and the iron ring set in the floor for securing slaves while they were whipped. The irony of this transformation, from place of confinement and despair to one of hope and progress was not lost on those familiar with its recent history. "The old slave pen was no longer the 'devil's half acre'," marveled one observer, but "'God's half acre.' This humble school that began in a former slave jail ultimately became today's Virginia Union University, an historically black institution of higher education in Richmond currently celebrating its 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

Between 2006 and 2009, we completed two archaeological investigations of the Lumpkin's Slave Jail site: a preliminary assessment followed by a full-scale excavation. These voluntary research efforts were sponsored by the Richmond Slave Trail Commission with project partners the Virginia Department of Historic Resources and the Alliance to Conserve Old Richmond Neighborhoods. Exhaustive background research told us where to look for Lumpkin's former lots in a modern landscape vastly altered since the mid-nineteenth century. But would we find any remains of the notorious complex buried beneath the jumbled ruins of a later iron foundry, railroad warehouse, and the embankment of Interstate 95?

Incredibly, we did. After removing many feet of later fill, we uncovered the perfectly preserved cobblestone courtyard where Lumpkin and his enslaved people once walked, and dogs learned to track runaways by chasing a young boy up a tree. We identified the kitchen building where African American women toiled to feed Lumpkin's customers, as well as the men, women, and children they came to purchase.

Unexpectedly, we revealed a massive brick retaining wall that divided the site into two distinct levels: the upper, "public" sphere of Lumpkin and his clientele, and a lower, sunken area, nearest Shockoe Creek, occupied by the enslaved people who passed through this forbidding place. This plain brick wall served a practical purpose on a sloping site. But it also formed an imposing physical and psychological barrier to those held against their will at the "Devil's Half-Acre." Finally, we uncovered the remains of the notorious jail building itself buried nearly 15 feet below the modern ground surface. Soon after, we were forced to backfill the site to protect it from persistent flooding in this low-lying part of the city. Although reburied, the site remains a much-visited stop on the Richmond Slave trail, with a small memorial park and interpretive signage.

During the excavation, many visitors to the site expressed how they were amazed and moved to see for themselves, and even to walk on, the ground where their predecessors, white and black, had been before them. In the words of Slave Trail Commissioner Reverend Ben Campbell, the very fact that we could now see and touch these physical remains made it impossible to deny that this had been an actual place, the scene of real suffering, and ultimately redemption. It can be informative and affecting to read about this history in a book or on an historical marker. But it is something altogether different to actually step into it.

Fast-forward to 2015. In August, Mayor Jones announced the launch of “Richmond Speaks,” a series of public “conversations” designed to give citizens the opportunity to voice their opinions on how best to interpret and memorialize the Lumpkin’s Jail Site. This news was met with skepticism by some in the community, whose attitudes clearly were shaped by a bitter political fight which had played out since the site was reburied in 2009. In the intervening years, various groups had mobilized in opposition to a large-scale commercial development plan for the Shockoe Bottom neighborhood anchored by a minor league baseball stadium. This plan never threatened the Lumpkin’s Slave Jail Site or the nearby early nineteenth-century African Burial Ground, both of which remain under City ownership. Yet, many of the project’s detractors cited the threat to other potentially significant archaeological resources in the construction footprint, and more broadly the inappropriateness of such development within an area that warranted commemoration as “hallowed ground,” given its intimate association with Richmond’s hugely profitable slave market, second only to New Orleans in scale.

The stadium development plan ultimately receded with little fanfare. But residual suspicions have served to complicate the ongoing discussion of the Lumpkin’s Jail site, with some assuming that the City’s plans for the site—whether it be a traditional museum or protective “pavilion” over the re-excavated remains—were pre-ordained, and would proceed regardless of the results of the public engagement.

From my somewhat “insider” perspective, I can honestly report that the City has made a good-faith effort to solicit and interpret public opinion through the four-month-long “Richmond Speaks” initiative, which is just now concluding. It has certainly been

far-reaching in its scope and audience, with over 1,800 Richmonders directly engaged in the process. Designed and implemented by the consulting firm of Lord Cultural Resources, the program has included five well-publicized public forums in various locations across the city, numerous smaller meetings with civic and religious groups, individual interviews and teleconferences with preservation organizations and other community groups, and classroom discussions in each of Richmond's six public high schools.

As an active participant in all of these, it has been fascinating (and often eye-opening) to witness at first hand the range of opinions and perspectives that have been voiced: lifelong Richmond residents expressing surprise at never having heard of Lumpkin's Jail or the importance of their city in the national slave trade, and then resolution that something must be done now to preserve and publicize this history; students asking for hands-on experience doing archaeology in their own backyard, and a local destination for learning about African American history and culture; community activists requesting that the City consider their alternative plan for development and commemoration in Shockoe Bottom; and established historic preservation groups skillfully lobbying for a broader consideration of the entire Shockoe Bottom district as an internationally recognized site of conscience.

The preliminary report prepared by Lord Cultural Resources in December offered six "implications" or recommendations for the Lumpkin's Jail Site based on the results of the public engagement process, each based on a key term. These were:

**"Expansive"**: Shockoe Bottom has many significant landmarks related to the antebellum slave trade; as funding becomes available, the vision for telling this story

should expand beyond the Lumpkin's Jail Site, while encouraging appropriate commercial development in the area.

**“Community”:** The Lumpkin's Jail Site should be a place that brings the Richmond community together. Ongoing programs should address issues of race, and be a safe haven for conversations about difficult topics such as slavery and oppression, both past and present.

**“Education”:** In partnership with Virginia Union University, the site's future development should include the creation of a Scholarly Advisory Panel of noted African American scholars; promote further study of the domestic slave trade in Richmond and its modern implications; provide training for students in archaeology, collections, and heritage administration; and develop a deep relationship with Richmond City Schools and the Virginia State School Board to provide for educational opportunities at all levels.

**“Authenticity”:** Provide ongoing public access to as much of the archaeological site as possible and avoid disturbing or obscuring authentic site elements with new construction or reproduction.

**“Interactive”:** Make the site come alive. Present opportunities for visitors to be immersed in the experience of what it would have been like to be Lumpkin's Jail through enhanced digital manipulatives and/or living history programs.

And finally **“Sustainable”:** Create a place that is able to withstand environmental, educational, technological, and fiscal changes over time. Form a relationship with the Black History Museum and Cultural Center of Virginia. Be willing and able to shift, expand, or contract the perspectives offered at Lumpkin's Jail and related sites as scholarship and understanding grows.

Lord's final report on the "Richmond Speaks" public engagement process will be presented to the Virginia legislature this month, after which it is anticipated that the \$19 million of funding pledged by the state and City of Richmond for the development of the Lumpkin's Jail site and associated facilities will be released. The City will then issue a request for proposal seeking to contract with a team of architects, archaeologists, engineers, and heritage consultants to design and implement the improvements at the site over the next two years.

As archaeologists, it's not every day that we can discover and interpret sites that give people the opportunity to actively engage in their own history, to frankly debate how best to balance preservation and development, and to engage in a meaningful discussion of the ways in which the legacy of slavery and racial inequality continues to challenge our society. As I've been learning, archaeology and politics can both be messy businesses. But in those rare instances in which they coincide, there is an opportunity to create something of real value to the community.