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The Significance of Richmond's Shockoe Bottom: Why it's the wrong place for a baseball stadium

Ana Edwards & Phil Wilayto



Image 1. Lumpkin's Jail" Archaeology Site, Shockoe Bottom: Protest and interpretive signage mark the site known by 19th century Blacks as the "devil's half-acre", April 8, 2014. Photo courtesy of Ana Edwards, Defenders' Sacred Ground Project, April 8, 2014

Most people in Richmond know that Virginia was long associated with slavery. Few, however, are aware of the central role the capital city played in that “peculiar institution.”

In the early days of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, African men, women and children who survived the horrors of the Middle Passage were brought by ship up the James River, unloaded at Manchester Docks and forced to walk to the slave jails of Shockoe Bottom. This is the origin of the Richmond Slave Trail, also referred to as the Trail of Enslaved Africans. Richmond's role in this trade actually was relatively minor compared to other areas, particularly the port city of Charleston, South Carolina. Other cities had their periods as leading entry ports, including Boston and New York.

But Shockoe Bottom later took on a much larger role: instead of receiving human cargo from overseas, it instead functioned increasingly as the place of departure for enslaved Africans being sold from Virginia to plantations in the Deep South.

One big reason for the change was the Haitian Revolution of 1791-1804. This anti-colonial struggle, the largest and most successful slave rebellion in the Western hemisphere, frightened the U.S. political establishment to its core. Political leaders were all for slavery, but fearful of the growing numbers of Black people in the country relative to the white population. The result was that in 1807 Congress banned the importing of Africans, with the ban taking effect the following year. (Virginia itself had banned importation in 1778.)

At the same time, three other things were happening. The world market for machine-made linen was expanding, driving up the value of cotton. In 1793, Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin, which greatly facilitated the harvesting of cotton. And with Napoleon abandoning his dreams of a New World empire after being driven from Haiti, France in 1803 sold the vast territory of Louisiana to the U.S. for a song.

So at the same time that the importation of captured Africans became illegal, the demand for slave labor in the Deep South had greatly increased as new cotton plantations were established. This led many plantation owners in Virginia and Maryland, where years of cotton growing had exhausted the soil, to realize there was more money to be made in selling human beings than in growing cotton. And as the demand rose, supply had to rise to meet it.

Virginia became what was known as a “breeder state” — human beings were literally grown as a cash crop. One successful entrepreneur bragged that his plantations had produced 6,000 children for sale.

And so the great trading center of Richmond came into its own. By the time the Civil War broke out in 1861, the downtown area known as Shockoe Bottom was the largest slave-trading district in the United States north of New Orleans. And more important than its size was that Richmond was now the hub, the fountainhead, of the U.S. slave trade.

In the three decades before the end of the Civil War in 1865, between 300,000 and 350,000 people of African descent were sold out of Virginia, most of them passing through the

auction houses of Shockoe Bottom. In the decade from 1830 to 1840 alone, it is estimated that between 10,000 and 11,000 people were sold each year from Richmond and transported by ship, railroad or by foot, fastened together in “coffles,” to the sweltering fields of their new owners.

In the process, the district bounded by Main, Marshall, 14th and 19th streets became one of the great wealth-producing areas of the South. And it wasn’t only slave traders who plied their trade there. An enterprise this large required many skills.

The heart of the business, of course, was made up of the traders themselves, both formal corporations and freelance individuals. Many of these had their offices and homes north and south of Broad Street between 17th and 18th streets.

But slaves also had to be held somewhere secure. Lumpkin’s Jail, the best known of the slave-holding businesses, was located just west and north of the present Main Street Station. (This area, known as the “Devil’s Half Acre,” later housed the origins of Virginia Union University.) Omohundro’s Jail sat at the southeast corner of what is now 17th and East Broad streets. William Goodwin’s jail, at the corner of 17th and East Grace streets, for a night held Solomon Northup, author of the book “Twelve Years a Slave,” now an Oscar-winning movie. Other jails were scattered around the district, often attached to the traders’ offices.

Shockoe Bottom held some 40-50 auction houses, most of them along 15th Street, known at the time as Wall Street. Other auctions were held in places like the Exchange, St. Charles and City hotels, the Metropolitan and Odd Fellow’s halls and Bell Tavern, located a block or so west of 15th. In addition, commodity brokers, who sold anything, including people, had their offices along East Cary Street from west of 15th to about 19th streets. The town whipping post likely stood in what is now the 17th Street Farmer’s Market.

For those who didn’t survive the Passage, or who died from their labors in the city, there was the municipal cemetery just north of what is now East Broad Street between 15th and 16th streets. In the center of that dismal place was the town gallows, where the great slave rebellion leader Gabriel was executed on Oct. 10, 1800. Abandoned around 1816, the site was variously used for the city jail and the dog pound. In the early 1970s it became a

commercial parking lot, used by students and faculty at VCU Health Centers. After a decade-long community struggle, what is now known as the African Burial Ground was reclaimed from its latest owner, Virginia Commonwealth University, a state institution.

Then there were the offices of the many businesses that serviced the slave trade: law firms, insurance companies and the shipping and railroad lines. One of those railroads developed into the present-day CSX Corporation. To help attract the trade of the slave dealers, it offered free transportation for children.

There were blacksmith shops and dry goods stores, including the original Thalhimer's one-room establishment. There were the clothing houses that made sure human beings waiting to be sold were properly dressed for viewing.

And there were the newspapers. The media wasn't located in Shockoe Bottom itself, but the direct predecessors of today's Richmond Times-Dispatch contributed by announcing the auctions, complete with the number, ages and genders of the "products" to be sold. They also assisted the slave owners by publishing notices of runaway slaves.

In this period, selling people was the most profitable trade in Virginia, and in one way or another most of the city's merchants and professionals found ways to take part. For example, famed attorney Patrick Henry did legal work for Thomas Prosser, who owned Gabriel.

The trade in slaves and the profits from slave labor built the fortunes that allowed a privileged few to rise to the highest political offices in the country and later assume the political leadership of what was to become the capital of the Confederacy — the political expression of the rule of the slaveholders and their merchant allies.

But in addition to the suffering and humiliation that Shockoe Bottom represents, there is also a story of incredible courage. From Gabriel's Rebellion of 1800 to the successful mutiny on the slave ship *Creole* in 1841 to the thousands of instances of individual defiance, this tradition of continuous resistance to injustice and brutality is a tribute to the deep resilience of the human spirit.

And there is another reason why present-day Shockoe Bottom is so ill-suited for a stadium. In many ways it was the crucible where the present-day African-American community was forged.

As stated above, in the 30 years before 1865 around a third of a million people were sold from Virginia, most of them out of Shockoe Bottom. By 1865 there were fewer than 4.5 million Black people in the entire country. That means that, all across the United States, as well as in Canada and Mexico, most African-Americans have some ancestors who passed through the auction houses and slave jails of Shockoe Bottom.

The slave prison on Goree Island off the coast of Senegal in West Africa is recognized as a sacred place for African-Americans. It is the bit of land where many of their ancestors were held before their final journey from the Motherland. In a similar way, Shockoe Bottom is that bit of land where many of the ancestors were held before their forced journey South to lives of desperate servitude.

This is why Shockoe Bottom has significance far beyond Virginia. There may be no place in the United States that hold more meaning for Black Americans. Just as those of European descent can travel to the Statue of Liberty to see where their ancestors first stepped ashore in the New World and find new opportunities, so Americans of African descent should be able to travel to Richmond to see where their ancestors were forced to travel throughout the country to labor for others.

Because of all this, this small piece of land does not belong to Richmonders alone. It belongs to the whole country and especially to all those people whose ancestors once stood there, bound and chained, forced to watch while their mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers and even their own children were sold away to lives of torment.

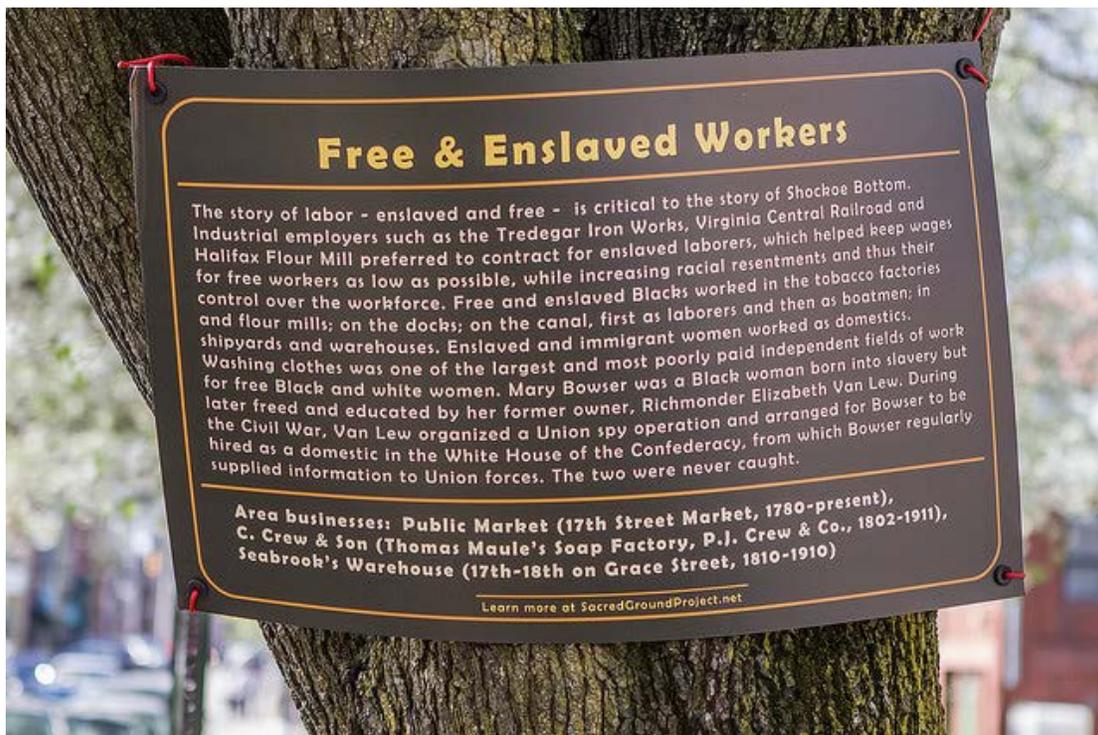


Image 2 & 3: Two of ten temporary historic markers placed for a walking tour of Shockoe Bottom called "Footprints of the Slave Trade", held on April 3, 2015, the 150th anniversary of Liberation Day and designed to convey the scale and normalcy of the trade and the city as a slave society.

Photo and markers by John Moser Productions.

Richmond's Shockoe Bottom has the potential to become an educational center of international significance. Properly preserved, this small area that once held such cold, commercial brutality could become a life-affirming place of study, reflection and meditation.

Like the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., it could become a place where people of all backgrounds gather and resolve to never again allow such inhuman cruelty. It could become a place of understanding, of healing, of reconciliation born of a country finally facing the reality of its origins, finally resolving to make right what has been so wrong for so long.

And yet this is the area that Richmond Mayor Dwight Jones, developers like the multi-millionaire H. Louis Salomonsky (who famously went to prison in 2003 for bribing a member of City Council) and the owners of the Richmond Flying Squirrels AA baseball team along with their supporters among Richmond's present-day merchant class have now targeted for a baseball stadium.

Shockoe Bottom is exactly the wrong place for this commercial project. We do not have the right to allow that kind of desecration to compound all the wrongs already committed there.

What was once a place of horror and sorrow must be restored materially and spiritually, so that it can play its rightful role as a reminder of what once was, and what can never be allowed to be again.

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