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Richmond's Archaeology of the African Diaspora: Unseen Knowledge, Untapped Potential

Ellen Chapman

While most of the visible city of Richmond dates back to the mid-nineteenth century at the earliest, its landscape been shaped by a much longer history. The written records of Richmond reveals that it has been a critical location during many different periods due to its placement on the landscape, natural resources, significance for riverine and overland travel and transport, political dominance, and economic and industrial strength – a strength that was substantially expanded through the city's profit from the 19th century domestic slave trade. Taking a longer view, the landscape of the Falls of the James River, around which the historic towns of Richmond and Manchester were founded, had been an important habitation, subsistence, and political boundary region for Virginia native people since at least the Middle Archaic period. By the Woodland Period, the Falls were a contested region claimed by both the Siouan-speaking Monacans of the Virginia interior and the Algonquian-speaking Powhatan chiefdom of the Chesapeake (Hantman 1990). Like several other river cities located along the Fall Line of the Chesapeake Bay watershed (including Petersburg and Fredericksburg), trade and subsistence along the river have defined life here for several millennia.

The corporate roots of the state of Virginia, through the founding of Jamestown by the Virginia Company in 1607, have been well documented (Kelso 2006). So too has been the arrival of the first Africans to Hampton in 1619, and the complex origins of enslaved and unfree labor in the colony, which included white bondservants, enslaved Africans, and native people with enslaved or servant status (Sluiter 1997, Campbell 2011, 60–85). However, much of the historical trajectory of the African Diaspora in Richmond has been hidden or misunderstood until recent efforts, and the contribution of the city to the domestic slave trade has only been investigated in the past few decades.

Although the site of early colonial exploration by central figures such as John Smith and Christopher Newport, Richmond did not become a focal point until after the Revolutionary War, when the town of just 600 became the new Virginia capitol in 1780. By between

roughly 1830 and 1860, the city had developed into one of the largest hubs of the domestic slave trade in the United States (Takagi 2000). It was also one of the earliest centers of Southern industrial power, was well connected along a number of transport routes, and was home to Tredegar Ironworks, one of the most significant iron foundries in America. These factors, along with the city's close proximity to the front lines of the Eastern Theater of the war, resulted in the capitol of the Confederate States of America being moved to Richmond early in the war.

The war substantially reshaped the city, and caused it to swell in population and activity. The city's warehouses were repurposed as hospitals and Confederate storage, and the population roughly doubled between 1861 and 1863, causing overcrowding and famine among its inhabitants (McPherson 1988, 617). With Belle Isle, Castle Thunder, and Libby Prison, the city also held substantial prisons for the Union enlisted men and officers. In contrast to the Revolutionary War, when Richmond was not substantially damaged by the hostilities, the Civil War had a fiery conclusion in Richmond. On April 3rd 1865, retreating Confederate forces set fire to downtown warehouses and the bridges spanning the James River between Richmond and Manchester, and occupying Union forces (led by troops that included six regiments of United States Colored Troops) entered the city. This dramatic day was celebrated as Liberation Day by the city's black population for many years, and has recently enjoyed a resurgence.

In the aftermath of the Civil War, Reconstruction and the city's critical transport and industrial infrastructure resulted in considerable financial investment and expansion in the city. The prominent black neighborhood of Jackson-Ward became a hub of black capitalism and political leadership, home to figures like Maggie Walker, John Mitchell Jr., and Rosa Bowser. African-American garden cemeteries were constructed in Richmond's East End to meet demand for elite cemeteries equivalent to Hollywood Cemetery for white Richmonders (Davis 2000).

New Developments for Old Archaeology

Notably, though the city has been defined through its complex history and considerable historical nostalgia (particularly significant for the Lost Cause mythology), the city's archaeological resources have received comparatively little research focus and preservation. Local archaeologists have described local resistance to archaeological investigations from a variety of sources; during the 1980s, L. Daniel Mouer described that "local companies, Richmond's government, property owners, even preservation groups like Historic Richmond Foundation don't have or want to pay the required costs [for archaeology]" and that the city had refused Mouer permission to perform self-funded excavations in city parks (Lazarus 1984). This resistance, along with substantial projects that were never completed, has left an indelible impact on the accessibility of sites in the city for archaeological and material culture research. To some extent this resistance to archaeological reviews continues today. In 2013, a city project to develop 17 acres of state land for a training camp for the Washington D.C. National Football League team was preceded by mere days of archaeological trenching and excavation, despite being mandated by the Virginia Environmental Impacts Report Act, and was cut short with little notice when the construction company wanted to proceed (Pilot 2013; Dovi 2014).

However, recent events have drawn increasing recognition for the richness of Richmond's archaeological record and its vulnerability. A new community archaeology organization, co-founded by myself, Dr. Kim Allen, and Dr. Terry Brock, is working to advocate for better understanding, interpretation, and preservation of archaeology in the city. The catalyzing event for this group, called RVA Archaeology, was the proposed Revitalize RVA development. This city-financed project planned construction of a baseball stadium, hotel, grocery store, slavery heritage museum, and other projects downtown on an eight-acre parcel of Shockoe Bottom. After Brock wrote a blogpost pointing out the extremely high archaeological potential of the site, the city contracted with engineering firm Greeley and Hansen to conduct a four-month archaeological investigation on the site. However, staff in the Mayor's Office also relocated the stadium in order to evade a Section 106 review, and have been consistently evasive regarding the extent of independent oversight of archaeological work (Oliver 2014).

The richness of the Richmond's archaeological record means that considerable research potential exists in the city, including topics associated with the African Diaspora, despite several missed opportunities over the last several decades. This edition will discuss some of these resources, which include African-descended bateauxmen on the James River, the infrastructure of urban slavery, medical experimentation on African bodies, the complex dynamics of racially-mixed colonial settlements, and the human impact of the convict leasing system. This, however, is the tip of the iceberg. Many other collections from the city could benefit from reanalysis through the lens of Diaspora, and several sites in the city could be excellent locations for research into the topic.

A Brief History of Richmond's Archaeology of the African Diaspora

The first African-descended people in Virginia arrived at Hampton in 1619, and were most likely enslaved individuals captured in a raid on a Spanish slave ship (Sluiter 1997). History and archaeology are relatively vague regarding the lives of free and enslaved Africans during the early colonial period in the Richmond area; while there were early colonial settlements (or settlement attempts) at the sites of Fort Charles, the town of Warwick, the Falling Creek Iron Works and Westham foundry, and explorations along the James River, few records of any sort survive of these seventeenth-century sites. However, somewhat more historical context is available for the early 18th century community of Rocketts Landing, which was characterized by a high degree of racial integration relative to later periods. During the eighteenth century, the plantation economy in and around Richmond expanded, and so too did the city's reliance on enslavement as an economic engine.

In Richmond, changes in the regional or global slavery system had direct impacts on the way people lived and worked. Until 1775, some enslaved people transported via ship to the dock at Manchester had traveled directly from Africa, or via the Caribbean. Slavery was intimately connected with life across most of Richmond, but Ancarrow's landing (the Manchester dock where ships of slaves were unloaded) and the many slave jails, auction houses, and slave trader sites of Shockoe Bottom and Shockoe Slip are where this legacy is most likely to be

materially visible. As has been only discovered recently through research by Elizabeth Cann Kambourian and cultural resource management company Dutton+Associates, at least seventy sites associated with slave trading are located in a mere twenty square blocks in the historic city center (Dutton, Friedberg, and Taylor 2014).

By the Revolutionary War, enslaved Africans made up approximately half of Richmond's 600 person population. During the hostilities, British troops in Richmond, as elsewhere, encouraged slave escape and rebellion with promises of freedom that were largely broken (Tyler-McGraw 1994, 60–62). By 1808, the domestic slave trade underwent rapid expansion after Great Britain abolished the transatlantic slave trade. Given Richmond's prominent industrial position and its site as the east coast's most inland port, the city became the largest exporter of domestic slaves outside of New Orleans (although Natchez also lays claim to this dubious distinction). Richmond's infrastructure also rested on urban slavery, and enslaved people worked in industries like Tredegar ironworks, doing domestic work for city residents, and on public works projects like the Confederate earthworks and all the major public buildings (Richardson and Duke 2008, 23–32).

In terms of the African Diaspora archaeology of antebellum Richmond, the collections from Lumpkin's slave jail, excavations at Tredegar Ironworks, a slave market site at the former of Cedar and Broad Streets, and the dissected human remains recovered from the Marshall Street well and are the most substantial collections produced thus far (Browning in prep, Laird 2010a; Raber et al. 1992). However, because the Lumpkin's excavation was hampered by the high water table, and the sites at Tredegar, and Cedar and Broad do not yet have widely available reports, even these sites' potential are not currently fully realized. Furthermore, the newly available material from the East Marshall Street Well Project has come about primarily as a result of a 2011 documentary and associated community pressure (Utsey 2011). Archaeological and curatorial best practices have sometimes not been followed, particularly at the Medical College of Virginia well (discussed in greater detail below). Finally, investigating urban slavery archaeologically is challenging given the sheer volume of materials produced and the difficulties inherent in associating particular artifacts and contexts with specific ethnic groups. However, these materials have nonetheless produced important information regarding characteristics of Richmond slavery. Landscape

analysis of the topography and layout of Lumpkin's Jail has demonstrated how structures of urban slavery recreated spatial inequality despite the density of urban living (Laird 2010b). Additionally, the bones recovered from the Medical College of Virginia well are important evidence for the dehumanizing practices carried out by the medical profession on the bodies of the enslaved, and have the potential to be informative regarding topics including the mobility, malnutrition, disease and diet histories of Richmond's enslaved population.

On April 3rd, 1865, the Confederate Army withdrew from Richmond after setting fires that spread through a considerable portion of the downtown warehouse and dock district. Liberation came to Richmond's black population that day, among the ashes and confusion of a city that quickly fell under martial law. Archaeology related to the African Diaspora post-Emancipation is limited, but shows some of the mixed legacy of Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction changes for members of the Diaspora. The impact of the black codes and the convict leasing system that rented out predominantly black prisoners to the western Virginia railroad projects can be seen at the Virginia State Penitentiary excavation, which uncovered human remains that were interpreted as the repatriated remains of prisoners who died working the rails (Nelson 2006). Similar to many projects related to Richmond's antebellum archaeology, there is current no site report for the Virginia State Penitentiary project, although work will be ongoing this summer to improve understanding of its associated archive and collections. Artifacts dating from 1867-1870 at Lumpkin's Jail likely relate to the use of the site as a school, the Colver Institute, for formerly-enslaved black students (Laird 2010b). Some limited archaeological investigations were performed at the Maggie L. Walker House, now a National Parks Service property (Saunders and Williams 1995).

Many archaeological projects relevant to Richmond's African Diaspora history are currently accessible through grey literature sources, but are not well-known outside of Central Virginia. The remainder of this edition will provide more details regarding these sites, including links to research reports and further resources when available.

Rocketts' Landing's Diverse Community of Immigrants (1740s-Post-Civil War)

Pre-dating Richmond by several decades, the port community of Rocketts' Landing grew up around the ferry port established by Robert Rocketts sometime before 1740 (Mouer 1992, 73). While this was certainly the driving force behind mid-eighteenth century settlement, the origins of colonial settlement in the area remain obscure, and the village is one possible



Figure 1. Bateauxmen on the James River are commemorated outside the James Center (Photo by Ellen Chapman)

location for the John Smith garrison established in roughly 1610, shortly after Smith purchased the Indian village of Powhatan on nearby Tree Hill. L. Daniel Mouer has described the Rocketts' Landing community as “a highly mixed community of merchants, free black and hired-out slave artisans and laborers, domestic slaves, stevedores, transients, mariners, innkeepers, and captains” (Mouer 1992, 39). A substantial research report (Mouer 1992) is available at the VDHR, and additional analyses are in preparation.

The Great Turning Basin of the James River and Kanawha Canal and Tobacco Transport (1745-1840)

In the mid-1980s, archaeologist Lyle Browning and canals scholar Bill Trout became aware of construction of the James Center in the location of the Great Turning Basin of the James River and Kanawha Canal. They enlisted the assistance of several volunteers, including professional and avocational archaeologists, to salvage the site. During short periods of excavation performed over several years more than sixty boats were exposed (often via backhoe) and recorded. This excavation was the basis of a Master's thesis by Bruce Terrell in 1992 on the bateaux used to transport tobacco along the James River, and this site is where a considerable amount of information regarding this boat type was collected (Terrell 1991). James River bateauxmen, many of them enslaved Africans, navigated the rapids at Richmond (now assessed to be Class II to IV) in shallow-draught boats full of tobacco hogsheads, passengers, and other cargo. The archaeological site and its discoveries resulted in the establishment in the James River Bateaux Festival and exhibits that have commemorated the bateauxmen. Additionally, the grand entranceways to the James Center financial buildings now boast several large pieces of statuary portraying men pulling the bateaux upriver against the current (Figure 1). However, the condition of the archaeological remains themselves remains tenuous (Kollatz 2014). Several fragments of these boats remain in storage facilities in the Richmond area, and continue to be in need of conservation, research and analysis. In 2014, the boat curated by the ASV at Kittiewan Plantation was named to the Virginia Top Ten Endangered Artifacts list, the first time an archaeological artifact has been named to the finalists list. There are also some submerged collections of artifacts that have not yet been conserved, and may have lost provenience information in the intervening decades.

The most substantial published description of the Great Turning Basin archaeology is [East Carolina University Research Report No. 7](#), which examined tobacco transport along the James using information regarding boat construction, details regarding artifacts found associated with the boats, and related historical records. The report also documents the financial and timing challenges faced by the excavators, as boats were re-covered by cave-ins, and boat recording was truncated by contractors destroying them. In the Chapter VI, Terrell

discusses the historical information regarding the boats' crews, romantic images about them, their rations and travel habits, and how regulations discriminated between the enslaved, free, and white bateauxmen.

The Marshall St. Well and Medical Exploitation of Black Bodies

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 have been identified by Smithsonian forensic anthropologists as predominantly African-American (Owsley and Bruwelheide 2012). They are associated with the illicit use of bodies, primarily black, in the nineteenth century for anatomical instruction at the Medical College of Virginia (Koste 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. The grey literature available for this site include an osteological analysis of the bones, an artifact analysis, a historical investigation of nineteenth-century medical instruction in Richmond, and an introduction describing the broad trajectory of the field recovery. Peer-reviewed publication of the osteological analysis of these remains are forthcoming in a volume from Springer entitled *The Bioarchaeology of Dissection and Autopsy in the United States*, edited by Ken Nystrom.



Figure 2. Shockoe Bottom from Church Hill, facing northwest (Photo by Ellen Chapman).

Shockoe Bottom: Archaeological Potential and Public Debate

Shockoe Bottom (see Figure 2) has become indelibly marked as an archaeological space, perhaps more than any other Richmond place in recent memory. The 2006 and 2008 excavations of the Robert Lumpkins complex by the James River Institute for Archaeology are the most publicly-oriented archaeology to have taken place in the city, and the recurrence of the baseball stadium debate in 2013 acquired an archaeological element when archaeologist Terry Brock began to discuss the area's archaeological potential in a [blog post](#) that drew substantial local attention. The Revitalize RVA development is a city-financed project proposing to construct a baseball stadium, hotel, grocery store, slavery heritage museum, and other projects on an 8 acre parcel of Shockoe Bottom. Following publication and media coverage of the blog, and a [Historical and Archaeological Symposium on Shockoe Bottom](#) in March 2014, the city contracted with an engineering company to produce an archaeological and historical review. This review, discussed before City Council by David Dutton in this [video](#), emphasized the likely sensitivity of the area, and particularly referenced the archaeological potential for recovering at least nine buildings associated with slave

traders; two major tenements occupied by free and enslaved African-Americans; two blocks of the original 1737 Mayo town grid; a major industrial and commercial corridor of the nineteenth century; and structures related to early Richmond churches (Dutton, Friedberg, and Taylor 2014). One of the most significant of these sites is a lot owned by Silas Omohondro on 17th Street, which may have included a slave jail as well as a boarding house and residence. Omohondro may have lived there with his enslaved wife Corinna, providing some parallels between him and Robert Lumpkin whose wife Mary was also of African descent. Partnerships between enslaved women and white city businessmen (particularly those most directly associated with the slave trade) have been repeatedly documented but little is understood regarding their influence or the rhythms of their daily lives, and this site could be an important material study. Another material remnant of the African Diaspora in Shockoe bottom is the cabin purchased for Emily Winfree by her former owner. Winfree was enslaved south of the river in Manchester, and her children's father was likely her owner. A community organization, the Alliance to Conserve Old Richmond's Neighborhoods, lobbied to have this structure preserved when the land around it was slated for a public housing development project.

Lumpkin's Jail Complex

During the 1990s, the Richmond Slave Trail Commission was founded to investigate and acknowledge the city's involvement in the slave trade, particularly the domestic slave trade that sold enslaved men, woman, and children born on Virginia plantations to the cotton plantations of the Deep South. The Slave Trail Commission

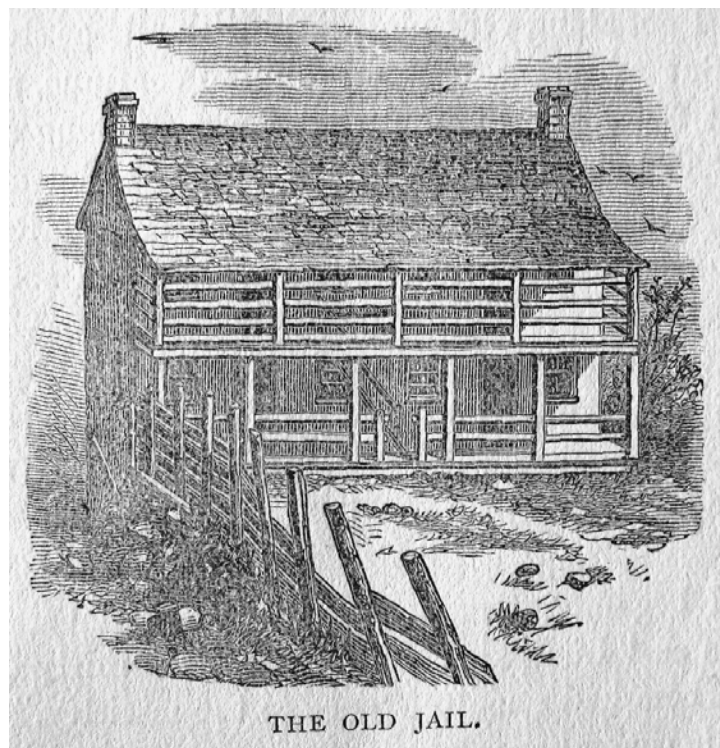


Figure 3. Engraving of Lumpkin's Jail in Charles H. Corey's, *Historical Sketch of the Richmond Institute*, 1876, p. 5. (from Laird 2010a)

created interpretive signage and statuary to mark sites on the north and south of the river associated with the transport, sale, punishment, residence, and resistance of enslaved Africans in the city. During the mid-2000s, the city partnered with the Commission, the Virginia Department of Historic Resources, and ACORN to fund an archaeological investigation at Lumpkin's Jail, a complex that included one of the most notorious slave jails in Shockoe Bottom.



Figure 4. Lumpkin's Jail Excavation with buildings identified (image courtesy of the James River Institute for Archaeology and the Richmond Slave Trail Commission).

The degrading practices at Lumpkin's Jail in Shockoe (it moved around several times, as most slave traders and auctioneers did) were revealed in a biographical account from the perspective of former prisoner Anthony Burns (Laird 2010a, 24–26). The site of Lumpkin's Jail was excavated in two stages by James River Institute for Archaeology, a [Phase II testing investigation](#) and a Phase III data recovery (report in [two parts](#)). Due to the extensive overburden (the jail was eventually located 14 feet below modern grade), the excavators only just uncovered the jail site when the excavation was concluded. However, the work recovered a considerable quantity of artifacts, much of it dating to the latter half of the

nineteenth century. Additionally, the archaeological work characterized the layout, topography, and orientation of the Lumpkin's compound as a carefully-assembled landscape of power that reinforced the power relations of urban slavery in a similar way as did the design of rural plantations (Laird 2010b).

Virginia State Penitentiary

The Virginia State Penitentiary site was excavated in 1991 by Katherine Beidleman prior to the demolition of the old state penitentiary. The excavations were primarily focused on searching for any remaining foundations of the original state penitentiary, which was designed in 1796 by Benjamin Latrobe, later architect of the White House and U.S. Capitol. While fieldwork indicated that most of the Latrobe foundations were destroyed in subsequent construction in 1928, some fragments of the original foundations were located and preserved in place. However, what no one expected was the presence in the courtyard of multiple human skeletons, consisting of individual burials but also disarticulated charnel pits. Although some scholars who have studied the materials believe them to relate to an unknown municipal cemetery, historian Scott Nelson and others have argued that they represent the remains of prisoners leased to the railroad in convict leasing. Nelson's book *Steel Drivin' Man* investigated the leasing system and has hypothesized that the genesis of the John Henry legend may have been John William Henry, a man who was incarcerated at the penitentiary and leased to the C&O railroad in 1874. The C&O at the time was digging the Lewis Tunnel in western Virginia, where they used a steel drill to help cut through the mountain. Unfortunately, Katherine Beidleman died in 2013 and no report was ever completed for the Penitentiary or its burials. The human remains from this excavation are curated at the Smithsonian, where they have been examined by Douglas Owsley and Kari Bruwelheide. Work is currently ongoing to assess the feasibility of recreating a site report for this site, which also includes an assemblage (including ceramics, architectural remains, and limited faunal material) that does not appear to have been processed since the excavation.

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