Preserving Difficult Histories
The Community Proposal to Save Shockoe Bottom

ROBERT NIEWEG

Historic Shockoe Bottom in downtown Richmond, Virginia, was once a major center of the nation’s slave trade and a place of terrible cruelty. Today it is a forbidding zone of blighted parking lots that conceal significant archaeological resources as well as painful stories that are essential to our shared heritage. For some, however, Shockoe is mere real estate, ripe for redevelopment. For others, especially in the African American community, Shockoe Bottom is a sacred place and a hallowed burial ground that must be treated with care as a Site of Conscience.

Preservation is an urgent matter for Shockoe. The only archaeological site there that has been properly investigated is Lumpkin’s Slave Jail, or the “Devil’s Half Acre,” which was just one cog in Richmond’s industrial-scale market for human flesh. The city’s Slave Trail Commission, which has made great strides to tell its slave history, proposes to construct a museum atop the excavated 1.7-acre site.

In 2015 social justice and historic preservation activists stopped a politically popular but deeply flawed proposal for a baseball stadium that would have devastated Shockoe’s archaeology and heritage. With our allies, the National Trust for Historic Preservation intervened to help save Shockoe through our 11 Most Endangered, National Treasure, and Preservation Fund programs. When the stadium plan was finally withdrawn in 2016, we turned our efforts to promoting a community-generated proposal to create a nine-acre Shockoe Bottom Memorial Park, conceived as a transformative place for learning, contemplation, and reconciliation.

The National Trust has pursued these advocacy campaigns—first against the stadium and now for the memorial park—with an alliance of individuals and groups led by, among others:

Ana Edwards of the Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project of the Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality:
Preservation Virginia is an esteemed longtime partner of the National Trust. The Sacred Ground Project and C*DE are valued new allies. Each organization has brought its own perspectives and assets to our joint advocacy. We engaged these three leaders in a conversation about Shockoe Bottom, our advocacy campaigns, and the future of the site.

What is the special significance of Shockoe Bottom for your organization? Why did your organization choose to become involved in advocacy for Shockoe Bottom?

Ana Edwards: In the three decades before slavery ended in 1865, between 300,000 and 350,000 people of African descent were sold out of Virginia to the cotton, sugarcane, and rice plantations of the Deep South. Richmond’s Shockoe Bottom district was the second-largest slave-trading market north of New Orleans.
The Defenders have been working in Richmond since 2002, when we held a forum about Gabriel’s Rebellion, a large revolt that Gabriel, an enslaved blacksmith, planned but was not able to realize before being found out and executed in 1800. We have since sought to memorialize Gabriel—a hero from black Richmond’s own ranks, struggling for liberation from within the bounds of slavery and repression—and bring his story to light. On October 10, 2003, we launched the Gabriel Forum, an annual commemoration on the anniversary of his death. In 2004 we led a campaign to install a historical highway marker near the town gallows in Shockoe, where Gabriel was executed. We also initiated the Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project to recognize the African Burial Ground (where the gallows once stood), which was closed in 1816 and covered by layers of urban development culminating in an interstate highway and a parking lot. The true scope of the slave trade in Richmond can only be understood by memorializing this burial ground and the other significant resources in Shockoe Bottom, thereby enhancing their value as historic sites and destinations for historic tourism—ones that are especially, though not exclusively, important for the African American community.

Elizabeth Kostelny: Although it had gone largely unrecognized until recently, Shockoe is important to our understanding of American history. As the center of Richmond’s slave trade, this place tells a complex and interconnected story that remains relevant today. Acknowledging this history, which has been covered over both literally and figuratively, and honoring this place are important to Preservation Virginia. It is overdue, yet still very timely.

In 2014 Preservation Virginia nominated Shockoe Bottom to the National Trust’s 11 Most Endangered program and listed the site as one of Virginia’s Most Endangered Historic Places. At the time, this site was threatened by the proposed construction of a baseball stadium that would have obliterated the archaeological remains. With representatives from the National Trust, the Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project, and other groups, we successfully organized to demonstrate the merit of an alternate plan to make Shockoe Bottom a place of education, memorialization, and healing.
Max Page: C*DE is dedicated to bringing the histories, stories, and design needs of underrepresented groups into the public conversation. Having told many important and difficult stories in Holyoke, Massachusetts, where we are based, we were naturally drawn to Richmond. We sought to help coordinate a rich community conversation there as well as to develop designs that would answer the community’s needs not only for a memorial park but also for new institutions to advance economic well-being, especially among those left out of Richmond’s prosperity.

In your organization’s view, why wasn’t the proposed baseball stadium an appropriate neighbor in Shockoe Bottom? What specifically did we do right as advocates to defeat the stadium proposal? What was the key to this win?

Edwards: The baseball stadium was simply the wrong project for Shockoe Bottom—there are far better opportunities for engagement in this historically significant neighborhood. The majority of black Americans today could trace some ancestry to Shockoe Bottom, which gives it the potential to be one of the most compelling historic tourism destinations in the entire country. African American tourism is one of the fastest-growing segments of the tourism industry, as evidenced by the fact that there are now more than 150 black heritage museums operating in 37 states. Virtually every other city once associated with the slave trade has developed a museum dedicated to that history. In fact, Charleston, South Carolina, which already has one museum exploring this past, is now raising $75 million for an International African American Museum. Scheduled to open in 2017, it will seek “to re-center South Carolina’s place in global history, illuminating its pivotal role in the development of the international slave trade and the Civil War.” But Richmond—which, given its role in the 19th-century domestic slave trade, arguably has the greatest claim to this history—has neglected its past.

Kostelny: Buried under the asphalt, the archaeological remains of the former streets and buildings of Shockoe Bottom still await discovery and study. Uncovering that history will provide new insights into the people who lived, worked, and passed through this marketplace. The baseball proposal would have destroyed that history, burying it one more time. We believe that there are more
appropriate ways to grow this area, developing the economy and creating jobs while still recognizing its history.

Advocates pointed to the lack of transparency in the baseball stadium plan and put forward alternatives that would both preserve the site and provide economic opportunities. More than that, we were able to raise awareness of Shockoe Bottom’s importance and advance a plan that recognizes the shared nature of its history. The national recognition of the site created steady pressure on decision-makers and convinced them that moving forward with construction of the stadium would cause serious harm.

Page: No one is against economic development in Shockoe Bottom, but sufficient space must be set aside to capture its historic resources, many of which are currently hidden below the surface. While the baseball stadium would have saved Lumpkin’s Jail, it would have wiped away so many of the area’s other historic resources—including archaeological remains of factories, jails, and slave market buildings.

The key to the victory was the persistent, vocal, and very public condemnation of the stadium plan. Having the support of the National Trust helped turn a local struggle into what it deserved to be—a national campaign for the protection and interpretation of a place of national significance.

Together, we are promoting a new, community-generated proposal for a memorial park. Why does your organization think that the memorial park is the best solution for Shockoe Bottom? How does the proposal achieve your organization’s goals?

Edwards: Shockoe Bottom’s features are unique and irrecoverable if lost, and its core is a highly significant archaeological, historical, and cultural site with essential connections to the African Diaspora, the domestic trade in enslaved Africans, and the origins of the city of Richmond. It can be transformed to serve the public through commemoration, education, and artistic expression, and its future development should blend respectful commemoration of this country’s history of slavery, cultural heritage tourism, and economic opportunity.

The memorial park proposal encompasses several practical and visionary recommendations: Secure nine acres of land at the heart
of Shockoe, most of which are already owned by the city, and protect them with zoning ordinances tied to historic district guidelines. Make the foundational design of the park beautiful and powerful, and people will come. Develop its resources in phases, starting with key features that will make it visible, logically integrated into the surrounding historic neighborhood, and programmatically connected to the city’s existing historic institutions. Showcase its educational potential. And ensure ongoing community engagement with the site’s development and programming.

Kostelny: On a practical level, we understand the realities of financially sustaining historic sites. As designed, the memorial park would create open spaces, gathering areas, and engaging interactive opportunities for learning and memorialization. It complements the conceptual plans for the Lumpkin’s Jail museum complex and provides a context in which to imagine the massive commercial area that once teemed with businesses—some that traded in goods, others in human lives. At the same time, the memorial park would allow for appropriate development that can revitalize this area, providing jobs and training opportunities for Richmond residents. We also understand the need for an archaeological investigation of the area and, from our experience at Historic Jamestowne, know that archaeological investigation can enhance the understanding of a place. By combining all these elements, we believe that the memorial park would attract diverse support, participation, and financing.

Shockoe Bottom was once an active and bustling city center, and the memorial park concept can infuse it with renewed purpose.
and vitality. Through archaeological research, education programs, events, markers, and public interactions, it can become a place to learn about the history of the slave trade, commemorate the people it harmed, and share a path forward through acknowledgement and reconciliation. Places like Shockoe Bottom allow us to move forward, strengthened by having confronted the realities of history and learned from the perseverance of those who came before us.

**Page:** C*DE believes in the memorial park idea in no small part because, across a series of meetings with a broad range of stakeholders, it emerged as the best solution. This project must come from the community, particularly the African American community. Richmond needed a proposal that residents—black and white—could support for its capacity to showcase a truly mature, confident city willing to fully confront its past. The memorial park would be a powerful symbol of the once-capital of the Confederacy now openly exploring its past and celebrating the multiracial city. C*DE was proud to be able to take the initial vision further and give it more detail as well as visual and rhetorical justification.

**Why is it important for the African American community to play a central role in designing and operating the memorial park? What role did the African American community play in creating the park concept?**

**Edwards:** Slavery ended more than 151 years ago, but systemic racism was just getting started. Driving around Richmond, you can see whose values have been honored up to this point, whose images have represented “us” to the world. It’s just not enough. Black people have the right to know their own history, to tell it, and to decide how it is represented.

Our country’s role in perpetuating a system and public landscapes built to sustain white supremacy is no longer the hushed talk of old white power brokers; it’s the talk in the streets and is now being openly challenged. “Black lives matter” is a simple statement made in opposition to a people’s literal devaluation. African Americans’ insistence that sites related to their history matter is an active rebuttal of that devaluation.
The African American community voice was always at the heart of the campaign to reclaim the Shockoe Bottom sites. The proposal was developed and vetted in public—through community meetings and protests; petitions, media programming, and reporting; and lectures and presentations in public schools, universities, and conferences—as well as at city hall.

Kostelny: The involvement of the African American community is essential to the success of the memorial park. For far too long, the history of Shockoe Bottom has been ignored and covered over, and ensuring that the African American community feels true investment in this site is essential to its future.

Page: This program must be led by African Americans, with white allies lining up to help. The story of this place is fundamentally that of enslaved people who fought back, resisted, endured, and maintained their dignity amidst a harsh, dehumanizing system. The Defenders and their allies have been uncovering that history for years and presenting it to Richmond’s citizens and civic leaders.
as a steady, gentle but persistent challenge to the city’s image of itself. The struggle in Shockoe Bottom is connected to a century of African Americans’ efforts to tell their history and to demand that the white-majority world acknowledge it. The fact that support for this effort has been growing is no doubt connected to the national Black Lives Matter movement, which has spurred calls for more dialogue and reparation.

**Following the November 2016 election, when Richmond voters elected Mayor Levar Stoney and three new city council members, what is the most important next step in the community's campaign to promote the memorial park proposal? What is your message to Richmond’s new mayor and city council?**

**Edwards:** We have a chance to rebuild trust between our elected officials and the people they represent and to demonstrate the good work that can be done when such trust is based on the truth of shared experience. Let’s move forward with the memorial park. Let’s design it so that the Lumpkin’s Jail museum is actually the seed project in a greater plan that memorializes sites like the African Burial Ground as places of unique and powerful resonance for all. Let’s commit to this for the long haul, do it well, and do it together because, while it won’t be easy, it will matter.

**Kostelny:** The memorial park proposal comes out of a community-based approach and reflects real opportunities for sharing this history. The conceptual design of the park supports the Lumpkin’s Jail museum plan and should not be viewed as competitive or in conflict. Incorporating the two proposals offers an opportunity for a stronger historic destination. The memorial park will become a place that people frequent regularly, and it will be able to support events and activities that strengthen the community.

**Page:** We believe that the new mayor should hit the reset button and call all stakeholders together for a conversation about how the Lumpkin’s Jail site museum project can and must be a part of the memorial park project. Memorial park advocates are not opposed to the museum as part of a comprehensive plan for Shockoe Bottom. But those who have pushed exclusively for the Lumpkin’s project must embrace the idea that these are complementary, not oppositional, projects.
As of spring 2017, the city of Richmond’s architectural consultant, SmithGroupJJR, is designing a museum for the Lumpkin’s Slave Jail archaeological site. Richmond residents are speaking up at SmithGroup’s public meetings, calling on the city to consider the proposed Shockoe Bottom Memorial Park alongside the Lumpkin’s museum.

However, another challenge is on the horizon: expansion of Shockoe’s Main Street Station to accommodate a proposed high-speed railroad facility. If the federally funded railroad project is built, it could overwhelm the neighborhood and preclude commemoration of Richmond’s slave history. On the other hand, if designed well, the rail project could spark equitable redevelopment and much-needed economic activity that would be compatible with the memorial park. Only the public’s continuing vigilance will ensure a good result.

As an active participant in shaping Shockoe’s future, the National Trust affirms the value of an interpretive center atop the Lumpkin’s Slave Jail site as well as the community-generated memorial park proposal. Both are in the public interest. To that end, we support a community-driven comprehensive plan for Shockoe Bottom that would incorporate archaeological investigation, heritage tourism planning, and sustainable economic redevelopment that is aligned with the city’s own revitalization strategy. FJ

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