

Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project

of the Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality

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Dear friends,

This is a national appeal for your help in the effort to save one of this country's most important Black History sites – an effort that has now reached a critical stage.

Richmond's Shockoe Bottom was once the site of the second largest slave market in the United States. In the three decades before the Civil War, most of the 300,000 and 350,000 Black people sold from Virginia passed through its auction houses. By 1860, there were 4.5 million people of African descent in the U.S., so just do the math: today, the majority of Black people in the U.S., Canada and Mexico can probably trace some ancestry to Shockoe Bottom.

This truly is Sacred Ground, and it could be a major destination site where all people could learn about the real history of this country. It should be developed as a nonprofit enterprise that provides jobs and income, particularly for disadvantaged Black youth, with a museum, genealogy center and interpretive exhibits. The Trail of Enslaved Africans should be enhanced, along with sites like the slave jails and auction houses. There should be green spaces for reflection and meditation; an African Market where independent craftspeople can display their wares; a performance space for plays, spoken word, music, film and art, as well as lectures and other educational events.

Instead, today much of the Bottom is an unsightly collection of rundown commercial buildings, neglected parking lots and old railroad tracks. The 18th century Burial Ground for Negroes, site of the execution of the great slave rebellion leader Gabriel, lies abandoned and buried under a state-owned parking lot.

But Shockoe Bottom also is prime real estate that has attracted the attention of profit-hungry developers, including two attempts to build a baseball stadium and retail/condominium complex on the site of the old slave market – attempts that have been beaten back by the combined efforts of preservationists, neighborhood associations and community organizations like the Defenders.

The campaign to reclaim the entire area for proper memorialization is now reaching a critical phase. Richmond Mayor Dwight Jones is appointing a commission to come up with a development plan, one that his economic development chief says should be “market-driven.” One proposal is for a massive medical complex. Others promote retail and commercial development, with only token attention paid to the area's historical importance.

We have recently learned that Richmond's City Council's official Slave Trail Commission has developed a proposal that adopts some of the ideas the Defenders have been promoting. We want to support any reasonable plan, but we also want to make sure that any historical interpretation of Shockoe Bottom includes not only the suffering that happened there, but the resistance as well. A statue commemorating Gabriel's Rebellion would be a good start. We're also pressing for the state to stop using its parking lot until the exact boundaries of the Burial Grounds can be determined.

In keeping with the principle of self-determination, we believe that only the Black community has the right to decide the future of this Sacred Ground, but we are asking for all people of good will to join us as allies in this effort.

Please read the attached flier and brochure for more information. Then consider doing the following:

- (1) send the three e-mails requested on the back page of the brochure;
- (2) visit Shockoe Bottom and tour the historical sites;
- (3) attend this year's Gabriel Forum, to be held Saturday, Oct. 10 (see the attached flier);
- (4) and please consider making a donation to help support us in this all-volunteer effort. (Checks may be made payable to “Defenders” and sent to PO Box 23202, Richmond, VA 23223. Donations of \$25 or more are tax-deductible if made payable to “UPAL,” our 501-3c fiscal sponsor, with the notation “Defenders” on the check.)

Thank you for your time, your interest and hopefully your involvement and support.

In the Struggle for Justice,

Ana F. Edwards

Chair, Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project