

THE COMMON WEALTH OF RICHMOND'S SHOCKOE BOTTOM

By Ana Edwards

Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines "commonwealth" as "a nation, state, or other political unit: as one founded on law and united by compact or tacit agreement of the people for the common good; one in which supreme authority is vested in the people." A commonwealth is the antithesis of a monarchy, which is rooted in the belief that its right to govern is divinely bestowed and not to be challenged. For a brief eleven-year moment from 1649 to 1660, England was without a king and declared itself to be a commonwealth—an English state governed by the will of the people. The short-lived experiment came to a bloody end, but the notion took hold in the imaginations of many on the outskirts of the realm, including the planter-politicians of the British colonies.

By 1776, Virginia had determined to separate from England and form her own commonwealth as part of a new United States of America. Our nation, Virginians declared, shall have a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. But which people? In 1776,

Virginians George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, James Monroe, and their ilk never meant to include ALL the people. Rather, they defined the “we” of the people to be propertied white males like themselves. In addition, the term “commonwealth” conjures up idealistic notions of wealth held in common, which sounds to the modern ear suspiciously like socialism. We are certain the founders did not mean that. Most were oligarchs, arch-capitalists bent on wealth accumulation for their narrow sector of society and their large vision of a manifest destiny. Those who were not of the same mind found themselves fighting to make sense of the fading commitment to liberty for all “men,” the enlightened rhetoric of their recently completed revolution.

“We the people”

Richmond’s African Burial Ground, Shockoe Bottom Memorial Park, and Monument Avenue each represent places that are in the process of being changed. These changes represent shifts in the balance of power and are expressions of the expansion of the people’s participation and therefore of the concept of “we the people.” The struggle to reclaim the African Burial Ground was a demonstration of the right of an oppressed people to self-determination in the face of their oppressor—the right to assert control over what they could not control before—in a place where a suppressed story of oppression, exploitation, and resistance central to their history finally could be told. Between 2001 and 2011, Black Richmonders determined that the 3.1-acre site in Shockoe Bottom was their common ground—a historical and cultural resource to benefit the public good, not the private

investor. But the people, who we also call “the community,” asserted the right to know, value, and interpret in that space.

The establishment in 1799 of Richmond’s first “Burial Ground for Negroes” represented a remaking of the landscape that, in turn, redefined the conditions of Black life and death. Although the cemetery was established by the municipal government, Black people used it to affirm their humanity through traditional burial practices. The city’s second municipal cemetery for Blacks opened in 1816 on land overlooking Shockoe Valley. This “Grave Yard for Free People of Colour and for Slaves” grew from two to more than thirty acres and, by the time of its closure in 1879, had received more than 22,000 burials. A series of intentionally destructive acts between the end of the Civil War and the early twentieth century reduced the site to a parcel of 1.5 acres that today is in the process of being acquired by the city for preservation because of the research and advocacy efforts of descendants of some of the people interred there.

A network of small, privately run, cemeteries for free Black folks grew as the city expanded north and south of the James River, especially after emancipation in 1865 when Black settlements became communities with homes, churches, cemeteries, and eventually schools. In spite of slavery and racism, Black people were Richmonders, claiming Richmond for themselves and their children. The battles they had to fight were to protect themselves from the terrors of racial violence, to thrive economically and spiritually as households and communities, and to educate themselves and their children to make their futures. Enslaved and free, skilled and unskilled Black women, men, and children had as much to do with the making of Richmond as their free white counterparts. Plainly these resourceful ancestors won many of

these battles, or Richmond would not be the 49 percent Black city it is today. The dangers, however, persist.

The ongoing struggle to properly memorialize Richmond's first municipal burial ground for Black people represents an act of reclamation for the common good. The violence of American history can be felt there, and it needed to be confronted.

Richmonders are confronting history in Shockoe Bottom, the epicenter of the US domestic slave trade from 1830 to 1865. They are confronting the memory of the brutality of slavery in the way the story is unpacked, presented, performed.

Shockoe Bottom is the "original" Richmond, a village of thirty-two square blocks arranged in a grid adjacent to the river and bordered on the north by ten-acre estate lots. This small trading village sat on a perfect topographical situation for its industrial and transportation future. The Bottom embodied, on the one hand, the capital generated by the trade in enslaved labor and, on the other hand and far more recently, racial progress. The community-generated proposal for a nine-acre Shockoe Bottom Memorial Park envisions a gathering place for reflection and learning that also preserves for future research and equitable economic development the last remaining parcels of land that can represent the enormity of the events that took place in Richmond and Virginia over the course of the 18th and 19th centuries.

Developed through an open, public engagement process, the Memorial Park concept was designed to acknowledge the history, the systemic mechanisms, and the individual prejudices that bar the way to a society supposedly built for the common good. The footprint of the proposed park presents and protects the opportunity to combine creative and practical methodologies for preservation, redevelopment, and some measure of justice.

The wealth held in common by Black Richmonders has been the creativity and resourcefulness that allowed them to weather the determination by white-supremacist policy actors to squelch their progress toward equity and full participation in American society. Literacy and voting were considered critical representations of freedom attained. The building of neighborhoods led to demands for appropriate infrastructure--public utilities like potable water, electricity, paved streets, trash pick-up. The first public monument to a Black person in Richmond came directly from such a demand, unfulfilled.

The first public statue to honor a Black person in the capital city of the Commonwealth of Virginia was commissioned and erected in 1973 by the Astoria Beneficial Club. The nine-foot cast aluminum statue of Bill “Bojangles” Robinson (by Richmond sculptor Jack Witt) stands at the intersection of Leigh and Adams streets, the site of the first traffic light north of Broad Street. According to the account on the Club’s website, in 1933, Mr. Robinson donated \$1400 to install this light “for the safety of the students of Armstrong High School.” I was fortunate to chat with Dr. Francis Foster, renowned local Jackson Ward dentist, VCU educator, community historian, and son of a founding member of the Astoria Beneficial Club, before his death in 2008. He recalled being able to attend the afternoon unveiling as a sixteen-year-old Armstrong High student because, as an upperclassman, his classes were in the morning. He said hundreds witnessed the ceremony, and everyone present knew that Robinson had paid for the traffic light because the white authorities of city hall had refused to do so.

Another example of the expansion of the “we” in “we the people” has been the transformation of Richmond’s iconic Monument

Avenue during the recent uprising against police killings. The Jim Crow–era Confederate statues on the avenue had been controversial since their installations, but the first public battle to disrupt the white-supremacist sanctity of these statues did not erupt until *seventy* years after the last one was put up. In 1996, the proposal to erect a monument to Arthur Ashe Jr., Richmond’s native humanitarian-scholar-athlete, was initially intended for sites in African American neighborhoods related to his tennis playing and coaching of the city’s Black children. But once the “Avenue of Lost Cause Memory-Making” was raised as a location, the city’s various factions leapt to heatedly debate the propriety of such a move. Even proposing putting a Black man’s monument on that avenue drove the covert racists right out into the open. “Sacrilege!” they cried. Well, then it was sacrilege of the best kind and also all too true. Ashe was an anti-apartheid activist, and planting the metaphorical Ashe flagpole in Confederate/Jim Crow territory was seen as a victory for social justice even as it overrode the Ashe’s family hopes for a monument erected in the heart of the community of people he sought to elevate and celebrate—an unintended consequence perhaps, but one that foretold of greater changes to come.

Over the summer of 2020, against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, the young Black people of Richmond and youths of other races transformed the pedestal, statue, and green circle of the monument to Confederate General Robert E. Lee into Marcus-David Peters Circle, renamed to honor the young Black high school teacher who, while experiencing a mental health crisis, was killed in May 2018 by a Richmond police officer. This renaming of a public space was another example of the people demonstrating their ability to affect the public discourse. They changed a place they had for so long experienced as one of hatred and ever-

present white supremacist values into a space for expressing grief and rage, and for finding love and unity of purpose.

In Richmond, the killings of George Floyd and Marcus-David Peters stand in for all injustices perpetrated against Black people because the whole of our civil rights are yet to be fully realized. Equality under the law has not yet been attained. Not for people of color, not for people of poverty. The Jim Crow-era statues on Monument Avenue stood defiant in the face of Black progress, but this summer, the sanctity of those white-supremacist idols was broken and the civil discourse of tolerance for injustice in our society was challenged head-on. The acts of rebellion of 2020 have transformed Richmond and cities across the country for the common good. Systemic changes are being demanded, and those demands are working their way up the legislative and judicial chains of command. These acts are a reminder that spontaneous demonstrations of the people's power are rarely without cause or context and will yield a wealth of consequences.

Commonwealth is organized and curated by Beta-Local co-directors Pablo Guardiola, Michael Linares, and nibia pastrana santiago and former co-director Sofía Gallisá Muriente; ICA at VCU Chief Curator Stephanie Smith; Noah Simblist, Chair of Painting + Printmaking at VCUarts; and Kerry Bickford, Director of Programs, Nicole Pollard, Program Coordinator and Nato Thompson, Sueyun and Gene Locks Artistic Director at Philadelphia Contemporary.

COMMONWEALTHS.ART

