

Status Report on Historic Resources Committee Project on Memorialization of pre-Civil War Auctions, Sales, and Transfers of Enslaved People in Albemarle County

Can we forget the crack of the whip, cowhide, whipping-post, the auction-block, the hand-cuffs, the spaniels, the iron collar, the negro-trade tearing the young child from its mother's breast as a whelp from the lioness? Have we forgotten that by those horrible cruelties, hundreds of our race have been killed? No, we have not, nor ever will.

– Isabella Gibbons, 1867

Summary

This project began in 2020, following the recommendation from the [2016 Blue Ribbon Commission on Race, Memorials, and Public Spaces](#) to “create a new memorial for Charlottesville’s enslaved population”, with a focus on how to properly memorialize a location in Court Square known as the Slave Auction Block. **The purpose of this status report is to describe the work already done and set expectations for our complete report later in 2022.**

We intentionally restricted the scope of this project as to not recommend that any specific actions be taken or any specific design for a memorial be constructed. The intention is only to create a solid foundation for future, appropriately-funded projects to develop and implement memorializations through a competitive RFP process.

We have three primary desired outcomes from this project:

1. **Descendant Engagement** - build trustful relationships with descendants and gather their desires for what forms of memorialization they wish to see
2. **Research** - original research using primary sources, and collection, curation, and contextualization of existing research into antebellum (pre-Civil War) human trafficking in Albemarle County
3. **Framing Future Work** - scoping and options for a future design and build phase.

This project began with a focus on the location in Court Square known as the Slave Auction Block. That site has had three different markers over the last 50 years (see Appendix A). In February 2020, a community member stole one of these markers and partially-removed another. Shortly thereafter, the HRC's Court Square Marker Subcommittee recommended to Council that a temporary marker be installed, and "Councilors agreed that the HRC subcommittee could go forward with researching proposals for a temporary marker, including the language to be used." However, in March, members of the descendant community asked that nothing temporary or permanent be installed/erected without descendant community input, and their further input was to request that a marker similar to previous ones not be re-installed.

One of the reasons for using the Slave Auction Block location as a focal point is that it is a space representing events that dehumanized enslaved people, reducing them to financial transactions. However, in consultation with Dr. Mabel O. Wilson, we were implored to also ensure that we adequately addressed re-humanization. This can be accomplished by naming, describing, and making these enslaved individuals not only lines in a ledger book, but as real, unique humans that they were.

One unexpected aspect of the research conducted as part of this project is that it has called into question the historicity of the Slave Auction Block site. However, it has also more fully clarified the scope of auctions and sales of enslaved individuals not only within Court Square, but also throughout Charlottesville and Albemarle.

One aspect of this project involves the political and ownership boundaries between Charlottesville and Albemarle. Charlottesville was a town within Albemarle County until 1888, when it became an independent city. The block that contains the Albemarle County Courthouse is within the City of Charlottesville, but the parcel containing the Courthouse is jointly owned by the City and County, while the parcel containing Market Street Park is owned entirely by the City. If the Courthouse parcel were to be used for memorialization, this would at least require the consent of Albemarle County, and ideally a fully-cooperative relationship.

Descendant Engagement

One of the most challenging aspects of this project has been descendant engagement. This has been significantly complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has prevented us from holding any in-person engagement sessions. All engagement sessions have been virtual through Zoom, led by HRC members Dr. Jalane Schmidt (Associate Professor of Religious Studies and Director of The Memory Project at UVA) and Robert Watkins (Assistant Historic Preservation and Design Planner in NDS). This has had the drawback of making descendant engagement with those who live in the area more difficult, but also engaged some people who would have otherwise not been able to engage, for example, a descendant living in Canada.

Our guiding principles for engagement come from the document [Engaging Descendant Communities in the Interpretation of Slavery at Museums and Historic Sites](#), also known as "The Rubric", a [deliverable from the 2018 National Summit on Teaching Slavery](#). Contributors to this

document include public historians with local relevance Niya Bates, Hannah Scruggs, Justin Reid, and Sara Bon-Harper.

The Rubric states that:

a “descendant community” is a group of people whose ancestors were enslaved at a particular site, but it can transcend that limited definition. A descendant community can include those whose ancestors were enslaved not only at a particular site, but also throughout the surrounding region, reflecting the fact that family ties often crossed plantation boundaries. A descendant community can also welcome those who feel connected to the work the institution is doing, whether or not they know of a genealogical connection.

This definition is an acknowledgement that slave owners’ reliance on family separation as an enforcement mechanism and slave traders’ significant exportation of enslaved people from Virginia in the 19th century created a far-flung diaspora and erased genealogical connections.

The descendants who have participated so far expressed two primary desires for any projects: that it be significant and that it have an educational component. They have generally expressed that they do not wish to have yet another insignificant plaque or marker, typically phrased as “go big or go home.” There is an expectation that one of the future projects is a significant physical memorial, likely in Court Square. The second desire is an educational component that interprets the chattel slavery system throughout antebellum Albemarle County.

One further limitation we face with descendant engagement is a desire to be respectful of the descendant’s time and emotional labor of participating. **We do not want to endlessly hold engagement sessions without the demonstration of a significant political and financial commitment from City Council.**

Research

This project has included both original research using primary sources, and the collection, curation, and contextualization of existing research into antebellum (pre-Civil War) human trafficking in Albemarle County. Appendix B contains a sampling of this research. While the term “human trafficking” is not commonly used in popular media for describing the era of chattel slavery in the United States, it has become a standard description among historians of this time period.

HRC member Dr. Jalane Schmidt, Associate Professor of Religious Studies and Director of The Memory Project at UVA, procured funding for two graduate student researchers, MaDeja Leverett and Jake Calhoun, to review Albemarle County chancery records between 1831 and 1860. These are the most accurate and relevant extant records, as any transactions of enslaved persons during this period would have been recorded therein. One of the most powerful results

of this is the rediscovery of the names of enslaved people sold at Court Square. So far, these include:

- Warwick, a man sold in order to pay off the debts and interest of John Douglass
- Phebe, a woman, and "her increase," who were enslaved by James Jopling and ordered to be sold by commissioners of the Court
- Lucinda and her increase, Alice, Hannah (child of Alice), Clara, Margaret, Mary, Harriet, Jim, Edy, Nancy, Dolly, and Eve, sold in order to pay off the debts of John Danielle

HRC member Phil Varner has reviewed hundreds of antebellum newspapers for advertisements of auctions. These have helped to clarify the form of auctions and where they took place. "Runaway" ads from enslavers attempting to re-capture fugitives from slavery have provided both names and humanizing descriptions that are typically absent from formal records.

As part of this project, we have found little evidence to support the claim that there was a stone block on the Slave Auction Block site prior to 1865 that was used as an auction block for enslaved individuals. We have looked through numerous primary and secondary sources and have found only one second-hand anecdote from 1906 that it was used for auctions, and several sources that we would have expected to have found mentions of it but did not. We know that a stone block approximately 18" x 15" x 30" existed on the south side of the "Number Nothing" building (0 Park Street) in 1906. We have three photographs from two other locations (one on and one near Court Square) that show carriage blocks matching this description.

We found a large number of references to the area in front of the Albemarle County Courthouse as a site for auctions. Roughly half of the hundreds of auction advertisements we have collected locate auctions in Court Square, with the other half occurring at the plantations at which the subjects of the advertisements were enslaved. Of those in Court Square, roughly half of those (one-quarter of the total) occurred in front of the Albemarle County Courthouse. The other half occurred at several locations around Court Square including the Swan Tavern (now demolished, present-day location 300-302 Park Street, the Redlands Club), Eagle Tavern or Eagle Hotel (now demolished, present-day location 300 Court Square), Jefferson Hotel or Mr. Garnett's tavern (demolished, present-day 500 Court Square, Monticello Plaza Condominiums, formerly Monticello Hotel), and the H. Benson & Bro. Auction Rooms ("Number Nothing" or 0 Park Street, building remains, as early as 1858, definitely by 1863, until 1870).

Framing Future Work

While this work began with the Slave Auction Block location as the focal point, it has expanded beyond this single location to encompass all of Court Square and Albemarle County.

One of our most valuable activities was a work session with [Dr. Mabel O. Wilson](#), Nancy and George Rupp Professor of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, a Professor in African American and African Diasporic Studies, and the Director of the Institute for Research in African American Studies (IRAAS) at Columbia University. The entire HRC meeting involving Dr. Wilson may be found [here](#), and just the work session with her [here](#).

As a member of the team that designed the [Memorial to Enslaved Laborers](#) at UVA, Dr. Wilson used her extensive design and public engagement expertise to channel the wishes of the descendant community into the design of a memorial featuring the sculptural work of artist Eto Otitigbe. Dr. Wilson emphasized that a key aspect of memorialization is not to only focus on the complete dehumanization of people through auctions, but also on rehumanizing them. This can be done through rediscovering such seemingly simple information such as their names, family relations, and personal descriptions.

This un-erasure of people's lives will require significant work in reviewing chancery records, newspaper advertisements, Confederate slave rolls, and other records that have any remaining trace of that person's existence.

Following the wishes of the descendants, we expect there will at least be a significant physical work in Court Square and an educational component. We do not expect that only one action or construction will be created, but rather a collection of projects serving unique but related purposes. We anticipate that these projects will cost from \$500K to \$1M, cover locations throughout Charlottesville and Albemarle (as many sales were held on the plantations), and include financial contributions from Albemarle County.

Possible locations for a physical memorial in Court Square include the new for the joint City-County Courts Expansion plaza adjacent to the Levy building, in front of the Albemarle County Courthouse either in place of the antiquated "Monticello" sign or where the Confederate "At Ready" statue was, in Court Square Park, or adjacent to Number Nothing (0 Park Street). Other more "distributed" monuments should be considered, such as those like the [stolpersteine](#) ("stumbling stones or blocks") memorializing victims of the Nazi regime in Europe. Additionally, while not related specifically to slavery, the corten steel monument for John Henry James from The National Memorial for Peace and Justice intended for installation in the locality that his lynching occurred is available.

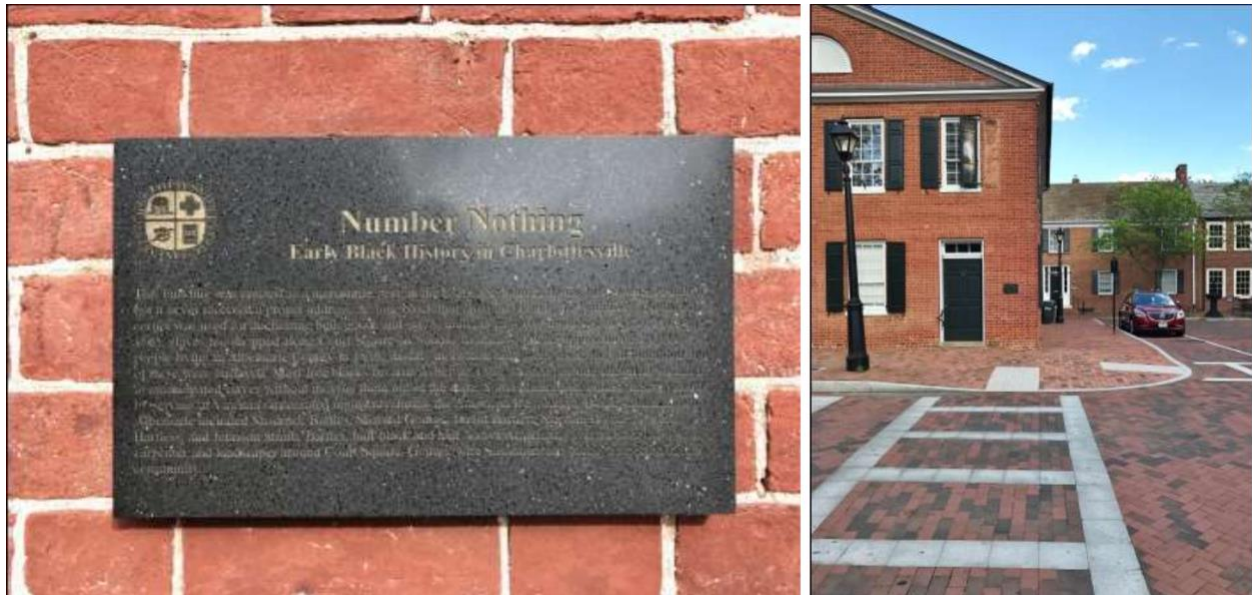
Appendix A - Previous Memorializations

There have been three previous markers of the Slave Auction Block location. Even if there was support for installing a new plaque now, we would not use this same language, as we generally no longer use words “slave” or “black” as nouns and capitalize “Black” when used as an adjective.

“Site of Slave Block” slate sign on Number Nothing (installed in the 1970s/80s, removed in early 2000s during sidewalk renovations, not reinstated)



Marker on Number Nothing, black marble, carved text with gold inlay. Over time, the gold inlay faded and the marker became illegible. (2003, partially-removed in 2019 during the theft of the bronze plaque, not reinstalled due to illegibility and outdated language and narrative)



Text of Marker:

Number Nothing

Early Black History in Charlottesville

This building was erected as a mercantile store in the 1820s for John R. Jones and Sam Leicht Jr., but it never received a proper address. A stone block that once sat outside the building's southwest corner was used for auctioning both goods and slaves until slavery was abolished in 1865. Prior to 1865, slaves too shopped along Court Square on Sunday mornings. Of the approximately 20,000 people living in Albemarle County in 1830, slightly more than half were black and all but 400 of those were enslaved. Most free blacks became so before 1807 when it became illegal in Virginia to emancipate slaves without moving them out of the state. Some blacks had gained their freedom by serving in Virginia's integrated regiments during the American Revolution. Black soldiers from Albemarle County included Shadrack Battles, Sherad Goings, David Barnett, Stephen Bowles, Peter Hartless, and Johnson Smith. Battles, half black and half Native American, worked after the war as a carpenter and landscaper around Court Square. Goings' wife, Susannah, was highly respected in the community.

in-sidewalk bronze plaque, with community-sourced correction of “slaves” to “people” (installed 2011/2012, stolen 2019, not reinstated at behest of HRC)



Appendix B - Summary of Research

References

- ["Site of Slave Block?"](#) by Gayle M. Schulmann, *The Magazine of Albemarle County History*, 2000
- [Interview with Fountain Hughes, Baltimore, Maryland, June 11, 1949](#). Audio interview with Fountain Hughes Hydraulic Mills property of the Burnley, where he mentions auctions occurring on a bench placed in front of the Courthouse
- Rebecca Fuller McGuinness recalls her grandmother describing an auction occurring at a "big tree stump in the front yard of the county courthouse", from an interview in "McGuinness' book of records", Charlottesville *Daily Progress*, 14 Feb 1999, by David A. Maurer.
- [Maria Perkins letter](#) (1852). Perkins' letter to her husband telling him that her son Albert had been sold "on monday court day" and that she will likely be sold on the next court day.
- [Early Charlottesville: Recollections of James Alexander, 1828-1874](#) (published between Dec. 1873 and May 1874 in Alexander's newspaper the *Jeffersonian Republican*, compiled and edited by Mary Rawlings for publication in 1942 by the ACHS)
- [Recollections](#) by R.T.W Duke, Jr. (1899)

Homan W. Walsh anecdote

This is the only original reference we have to the Slave Auction Block location.

From [Early Charlottesville: Recollections of James Alexander, 1828-1874](#), edited by Mary Rawlings (1942), page 19.

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uva.x000239102&view=1up&seq=11>

To Alexander's original text written sometime in 1873 or 1874:

"On the east side of the Public Square, stands the brick building known as No. Nothing;"

Rawlings added the following footnote in her edited edition published in 1942:

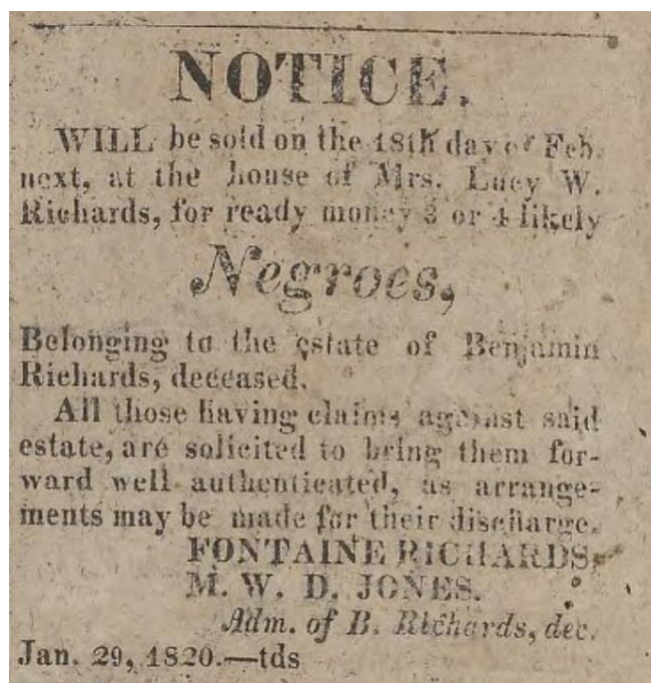
1. Still standing, 240-242 Court Square. This lot was bought, June 15, 1820, by Opie Norris and John C. Ragland, from Edmund Anderson of Richmond, Albemarle County Deed Book 22, p. 334.... At some later period, traditions of the slave trade gathered about this house. Some hold that the lot to the rear was used for this purpose. **Mr. Homan W. Walsh**, whose offices — formerly those of Mr. Dan Harmon — occupy the southern half, informs us: "I have, of course, heard that the building was used as a slave auction room. ... I have never heard of a sign on the wall, relating to its use as a slave

market. **When I commenced practicing law in Mr. Harmon's office in 1906 and for several years afterwards there was at the side of the office at the curb a large stone, perhaps 18 inches high by 15 inches wide and 30 inches long, which it was said was the auction block for selling slaves.** ... It was taken away years ago by some employees of the city, when cleaning the streets or paving this section. . . . To this he adds that since writing, a southern snow brought out for an hour some black lettering through the paint on the southern side of his office, facing the Monticello Hotel, as follows: " — BENSON AND BRO. AUCTION ROOMS." As the Bensons were for years the town auctioneers, and this sign was just over the auction block, we may infer that all auctions were conducted here, and thus when slaves were brought in, their dealers made use of these facilities.

Based on this anecdote, the block location was added to the birds-eye view map "A View of Charlottesville circa 1828" created by the ACHS and published at least as early as the 1976 bicentennial publication *Albemarle, Jefferson's County, 1727-1976*. This map is frequently misunderstood as a map of Charlottesville from 1828, rather than a modern creation. Henry Benson leased Number Nothing for his auction rooms as early as 1863 through 1870. Benson was himself a slave owner (1850 and 1860 census) and is listed as the auctioneer for several estate sale advertisements including enslaved individuals.

Newspaper Advertisements

The earliest advertisement we have for enslaved persons is the estate sale of Benjamin Richards at his former house from the *Central Gazette*, January 29, 1820.



The first advertisement we have for an auction in Court Square is from the *Central Gazette*, November 24, 1820, at the Albemarle County Courthouse.

CASH SALE.

On the first Monday in January next, the subscriber, Executor of Charles Wingfield, deceased, will offer for sale for Cash, at the Court-House of Albemarle County, about

20 Likely Negroes,
Men, Women and Children,
Carriage & Harness
Bed and Furniture, Sofa, Tea-Table, Scott's Family Bible in five volumes, Doddridge's Family Exposition in six volumes and Blair's Sermons.

All persons indebted to the said estate, are requested to make payment on or before the above named day of sale, as no indulgence can be given.

FRANCIS WINGFIELD,
Executor of
CHAS. WINGFIELD, dec.

Nov. 24. 1820—tds

One of the most well-known sales is this 1829 auction at the Eagle Hotel on Court Square of the remainder of the estate of Thomas Jefferson, after [the more infamous 1827 auction at Monticello](#).

Virginia Advocate, December 13, 1828

<p>WILL be sold, on the FIRST OF JANUARY, in the town of Charlottesville, in front of the <i>Eagle Hotel</i>, THIRTY SLAVES, consisting of men, women and boys, among whom are several valuable tradesmen. The terms will be made known on the day of sale.</p>	<p>T. J. RANDOLPH, <i>Excutor of THOMAS JEFFERSON, deceased.</i></p>
<p>Dec 13</p>	<p>ts</p>

Virginia Advocate, 13 December 1828.

The advertisement for the sale of the well-known "Dunlora" plantation is an example of an estate sale after the death of the owner. As was common, the auction occurred on-site at the plantation.

Jeffersonian Republican, November 27, 1845

**VALUABLE
ALBEMARLE**
ESTATE AT AUCTION.
THE Subscriber will offer, at Auction, on the premises, on the 10th of December next, the estate called
"DUNLORA,"
the late residence of Col. Samuel Carr, containing by recent survey,
Four Hundred & Forty three Acres.

Of these ONE HUNDRED AND SIXTY are Rivanna low-grounds of the finest quality; more than *one hundred acres* are heavily timbered, the greater part of which is within two miles of Charlottesville, where wood commands a ready sale and high price.— The rest, except what has been seeded in Wheat this fall, is well set in Grass. This estate is situated between *two and three* miles north of Charlottesville, and within four miles of the University of Virginia, in a wealthy neighborhood remarkable for its intelligence and morality. The Rivanna river which bounds this estate, is navigable for bateaux in both of its branches for five and six miles above it, to large manufacturing mills of the highest repute. There is also another large mill one mile below, on a tributary of the Rivanna. The improvements consist of a large and elegant brick building, and *all* necessary out houses.

TERMS.—One fourth on the 15th of February, 1846, and the balance in three equal annual payments thereafter.

Immediately after the sale of the land, there will also be offered at auction,
THIRTEEN YOUNG AND LIKELY NEGROES,
all the Stock, Plantation Utensils, and Furniture, and the crops of Corn (about 300 barrels.) Hay and Tobacco. Terms made known on day of sale.

GEORGE WATSON CARR.
October 9, 1845.

This example from 1858 is an example of a sale by Henry Benson prior to him moving his Auction Room to Number Nothing, as other advertisements indicate a different location for them off of Court Square. The auction occurred at the Courthouse on court day as part of an estate liquidation.

Jeffersonian Republican, October 14, 1858

FOR SALE.
I WILL offer for sale at Auction on **MONDAY 1ST NOVEMBER NEXT**, at the Court House, of Albemarle, **A VERY LIKELY SERVANT GIRL**, 17 years of age. She is an excellent Seamstress. **TERMS**, at time of sale.
Oct. 14, 1858—3t.
J. W. JONES, Adm'r,
of **J. W. Bear, dec'd.**

Jeffersonian Republican, November 4, 1858

Highprice for a Slave Woman.
Henry Benson & Bro., Auctioneers, sold on Monday last, a negro girl belonging to the estate of J. W. Bear, dec'd for the sum of one thousand three hundred and ninety seven dollars.

This advertisement is an example of a Henry Benson auction, likely occurring at his auction rooms at Number Nothing.

Charlottesville *Daily Chronicle*, January 1, 1865

AUCTION SALES.
BY BENSON & BRO.

TWO VALUABLE FAMILIES OF NEGROES AT AUCTION.

WE WILL sell on Monday, January 2d, (Court day,) two Valuable Families of Negroes—one a woman with 5 children—the other a woman with 3 children.

H. BENSON & BRO.

dec. 25, tda.

This is another example of a Henry Benson auction, though this auction would not have occurred as advertised on March 6, 1965, as Charlottesville was liberated from Confederate control on March 3rd.

Charlottesville *Daily Chronicle*, February 22, 1865

BY BENSON & BRO.

NINE VALUABLE NEGROES AT
AUCTION.

WE will sell at our Auction Rooms on the
6th of March. (Court day) a likely
young Negre Man, and a young Woman, heal-
thy, and a good house servant, with seven chil-
dren. They will be sold for Cash.

BENSON & BRO.

feb. 18, tds.