

Slave Plaque Mystery at the Courthouse, Centerpiece of Mr. Jefferson's Town

"Race is the great undiscussed issue in American Politics. Virginia, especially, has a colorful history of racial animus that people find difficult to talk about. That lack of discussion guarantees that our history of racial discrimination carries very real effects into today's laws and customs that often go unnoticed or uncorrected." Bob Gibson, *The Daily Progress*, July 20, 2014, p. B1.

On June 10, 2014 the following letter appeared in the Charlottesville *Daily Progress*, authored by a notable civil rights activist and senior member of the city's African-American community:

It appears that to Charlottesville's government, black history does not matter. I have not seen one letter or heard any concerns raised about the historic marker that was removed from 0 Court Square. The slate plaque, which marked the site of Charlottesville's slave auction block, disappeared at some point — even though other plaques on buildings on Court Square remained.

Recently, the plaque — with white text in a large font that was easily visible from a distance — was replaced by an unobtrusive marker set into the sidewalk and a dark-brown marble plaque on the wall. The plaque is difficult to see, let alone read.

These questions come to mind:

When were the slate markers put on buildings on Court Square? Who decided to remove the "Site of Slave Block" slate, and why? When was it taken down? Were the City Council and city manager informed that the slate had been removed?

Slates on other buildings on Court Square can be read from a distance — but the replacement plaque, because it is nearly the same color as the surrounding brick, is almost invisible unless a person is already close to the building.

As for the marker in the sidewalk, I doubt that people walking past even notice it. Are any other historic markers in the city relegated to the sidewalk?

Finally, were any African-Americans or the University of Virginia history department consulted before a marker that documented slavery — such a shameful chapter in Charlottesville's and Albemarle County's history — was eliminated?

Eugene Williams – Charlottesville

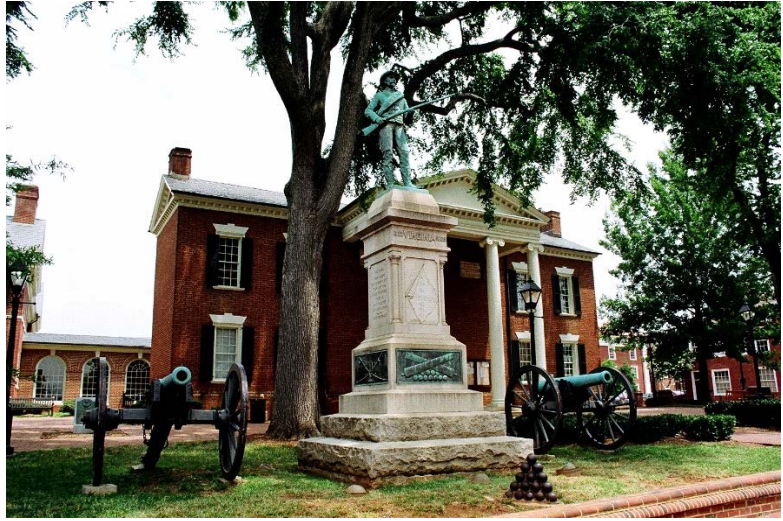
As a writer/researcher concerned with issues surrounding enslavement of Native and African Americans in our southeast region, the letter piqued my attention. I know that how we remember history directly affects how we live together today. I waited for journalistic follow-up on the questions Mr. Williams had raised. None occurred.

I spoke briefly with Mr. Williams by phone. He felt that the original sign should be restored, and was disturbed that it had been replaced by a marker on the sidewalk. "No one knows to look down and see that," he said. "It is like our people's history is still something to be ignored. To just be walked on top of." Williams sent me a 1978 photo of himself and the grey plaque.



I decided to take a stroll around Court Square myself. It is a dramatic and historic venue, one most citizens of Albemarle County have visited. Those owning property, recording deeds, studying genealogy, engaged in civil or criminal proceedings, or tourists interested in early US architecture or history all find themselves drawn to this distinctive and magisterial place. Court Square, I realized, was a zone of commemoration. A looming 4x5 foot Guide Map to Historic Courthouse Square announced that here for over 200 years it stood as “one of America’s most historic courthouses, used by three early Presidents.” I pulled out a memo book to jot down what I would find here.

Except for the Courthouse itself, part of which dates to 1803, there are two immediately prominent features. 1) A mighty equestrian tribute to Stonewall Jackson dominates everything west of the courthouse. 2) The other statue was a twenty-five foot tall column commemorating a confederate soldier, flanked by two large cannons of that era, installed by Daughters of the Confederacy in 1908. It reads: “*Lest We Forget – Warriors, your valor, devotion to duty and fortitude under privations teach us how to suffer and grow strong.*” A bronze State of Virginia seal reads: *Sic Semper Tyrannus*, “Thus always to tyrants.”



(<http://www.charlottesville.org/Index.aspx?page=348> and <http://cvillelocalmarketing.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/05300021.jpg>)

3) There were a number of plaques and markers naming important historic figures: USMC Commandant Gen. A. A. Vandergrift; Merriwether Lewis; Thomas Jefferson-James Madison- James Monroe (This trio memorialized upon dramatic fieldstone); Lafayette's visit to Jefferson's Monticello; and two memorials to local hero Jack Jouett. All of these honorees are men of European descent.

4) And there were a large number of plaques honoring historic Property. Prominent among these were handsome grey slate wall plaques highlighted with dignified period lettering in white. These callouts included such things as "Albemarle County Co Courthouse 1803; Site of first Post Office and Shops, early 1800s; Watchmaker's shop; First Public Library; Storehouse-early 1800;" and Mercantile business-early 1800s, #0 Park Street."

By my count, there were ten of the dignified grey slate "plaques — with white text in a large font that was easily visible from a distance" that Mr. Williams had referred to in his letter of concern to the newspaper.

I also counted not one but two of what Williams noted as "marble plaques on the wall... difficult to see, let alone read."

Both were in small font, the black or very dark brown stone highly polished. Because of reflection, they were a challenge for this writer to read, too. One of these commemorated "The Historic Eagle Tavern, 1791." The other one was on a corner of the building already well-marked in large script with grey slate as "#0 Park Street."

5) This second near-unreadable plaque, focus of Mr. William's letter of concern, reads:

Number Nothing – Early Black History in Charlottesville "This building was erected as a mercantile store in the 1800's for John R. Jones and Samuel Leitch, Jr. but it never received a proper address. A stone block once stood outside the southwest corner. It was used for auctioning goods and slaves until slavery was abolished in 1865.....Of the approximately 20,000 people in Albemarle County in 1830, slightly more than half were black and all but about 400 of these were enslaved. Most free blacks became so before 1807 when it became illegal in Virginia to emancipate slaves without moving them out

of state. Some blacks gained freedom serving in Virginia's integrated regiments during the American Revolution. Black soldiers from Albemarle included Shadrack Battles, Sherard Goings, David Barnet, Stephen Bowles, Peter Hartless, and Johnson Smith. Battle, half black and half Native American, worked after that war as a carpenter and landscaper around Court Square. Goings' wife Susannah was highly respected in the community."



<http://www.charlottesville.org/Index.aspx?page=1988> Small black plaque is visible on right corner of #0 Park Street (also called #0 Courthouse Square). Grey "#0 Park Street" plaque on left, below flag.

The tiny marker required diligent squinting that few would undertake. However I did feel newly informed by what I learned: African American contributions to the Revolution; the large number of people sold on this very spot; some human vignettes. It felt significant to be standing on the place where most of those 12,000 or so enslaved persons by 1830, plus many thousands more up until 1865, had been sold. And it was from the corner of this building that the dignified grey slate "Site of Slave Block" plaque had been removed. Easy visual access to the fact that our local economics of enslavement started right *here* had been excised.

I gave a moment of reflection then felt a wave of embarrassment. I sensed a coded message in the caption incised in the new replacement. From my perspective as a historian, it seemed now to convey: "Early Black History in Charlottesville, it Numbers Nothing of any importance."

Quick research informed me the courthouse had stood here since 1761. Until some recent date this significant fact - that for some 104 years blacks had been sold right beside it as Property - had been commemorated with equal grey slate recognition as 10 other exactly similar markers of historic Property. Yet as Williams noted, only this bit of community memory had been revised, replaced with information that, however informative, was essentially unreadable. The replacement plaque was undeniably a

“memorial.” But why that ambiguous headline? The other end of the same building retained its noble grey plaque: “#0 Park Street.” To me there was zero need to re-memorialize its Zero number on this plaque?

I scanned all my notes. I turned around and reconsidered everything that was in view. Again, the sheer size and prominence of the two memorial statues to a Sacred Lost Cause - defending the enslavement of human laborers as animal Property - jumped out. But how was it that those slaves themselves, in this very same town-center location, had become “censored” into obscurity and condescension? I began to take umbrage right along with Mr. Williams for the removal of their plaque, one that was equal with all those dignified grey other ones.

Then, turning around, I had a sudden aha-moment. Right before my eyes I saw how these unheralded slave-artisans of my county had in fact left behind the biggest memorial to themselves in the entire majesty of Court Square.

There in front of me I saw uncountable slave-made bricks and massive red brick constructions of historic architecture, buildings where “Justice” had been meted out for centuries. These were the living monument to uncountable hundred thousands of unremunerated man hours of slave labor. I thought about Mr. Jefferson’s own home Monticello, and his prestigious historic university, both nearby. I considered all the antebellum brick buildings in Charlottesville, all the fabulous ancient plantation horse farms of old Albemarle. In probably seventy-five to ninety percent of this entire array, the land-clearing, timber cutting, and everything else was originally achieved by enslaved persons. By human beings listed in documents as property, or “laboring stock.” What a notable transfer of wealth these unpaid and subjugated folk had made, under pain of the lash or death, to a dominant class of primarily Euro-descended people of a different race.

Still, I took the point Mr. William’s letter to the newspaper had raised. Exactly what became of the antique grey plaque which had visibly memorialized this at Court Square, at the intersection of Jefferson and Park streets? And exactly who decided to remove it? It *was* important to know.

I spoke with Roberta Brownfield, owner of the historic building carrying the slate plaque #0 Park Street, who told me: “Our building was erected later than others on the Square, because its site had been used for the Block where slaves were auctioned. Other street numbers had been already assigned, so it was given the number “0”. The city removed the slate marker and put the new black marker in place twice. The first one had a typo. But our tenants requested that the Slave Block sign not be reinstalled. They had too many door knocks interrupting their business. So the city put metal marker in the sidewalk instead.”

Next I contacted the official spokesperson regarding such an issue, Mary Joy Scala, Preservation and Design Planner for the City of Charlottesville. In reply to my query she wrote: “It seems the grey slate plaque reading “Site of Slave Block” was removed from Courthouse Square at some time between 1985 and 2002. I started working here as our town's Preservation and Design Planner in 2003. I do not know why the grey plaque was removed or who removed it.

“Since the plaque had been installed on private property, there would have been no need for the owner of #0 Park Street to notify city officials about its removal. When a citizen expressed concern about the removal and asked that the sign be restored, we approached the property owner, who did not want it placed back on the building. Therefore, our department had a bronze sign installed in the City sidewalk near the building. As for the engraved black plaque reading “Number Nothing – Early Black History in Charlottesville,” it was installed on the #0 Park Street brick building by the City’s Historic Resources Task Force around 2002-2003.

"I do not believe it was intended to replace the slate markers, several of which remain. You are correct that the black granite plaques are hard to read. The City's Historic Resources Committee is currently working on a new series of Court Square markers to replace the hard-to-read granite ones (but not the slate ones, which will remain). The intent is to tell a more complete story about Court Square, including positives and negatives. The historic name of 0 Court Square is "Number Nothing."

Ironically, and reinforcing Mr. Williams concern about ambiguity surrounding the Slave Block marker, a check of the Historic Resources Committee indicates there is no one is presently assigned to oversee "working on a new series of Court Square markers to replace the hard-to-read granite ones." Ms. Scala did not reply to a query about who is responsible for this project or what the timetable is for completion. In the winter of 2014, the headline implying that "Black History Amounts to Nothing" remains in place. There is small brass marker in the sidewalk, unnoticeable; it mocks enslavement by placing it underfoot. To this writer this issue is an embarrassment to our community.

I returned to the corner where the century of slave auctions took place, and found myself thinking of a new marker to replace the present one that is illegible and poorly captioned.

It would be erected at Charlottesville's Historic Court Square *on a monument equally large as the Rebel soldier.* It would read almost the same as the one memorializing rebel courage:

"To Albemarle's Original Builders - Lest We Forget – Warriors of Labor, your valor, devotion to duty and fortitude under privations teach us today how to suffer and grow strong."