

**DRAFT RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESEARCH, MEMORIALIZATION
AND INTERMENT OF THE EAST MARSHALL STREET WELL
ANCESTRAL REMAINS**

**SUMMARY REPORT PREPARED BY VCU EAST MARSHALL STREET WELL
FAMILY REPRESENTATIVE COUNCIL**

SUBMITTED TO VCU EAST MARSHALL STREET WELL PLANNING COMMITTEE

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INTRODUCTION

This report provides a summary of work completed to date by the Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) East Marshall Street Well (EMSW) Family Representative Council (FRC). Draft FRC recommendations for proper research, memorialization and interment of the “EMSW Ancestral Remains” and associated artifacts are submitted to the EMSW Planning Committee for comment. Feedback from the Planning Committee will inform the final recommendations of the FRC which will be presented publicly at the fifth Community Consultation of the EMSW Project.

Following this introduction, the remainder of this report is divided into four sections that include, respectively:

1. an overview of the goals and structure of the FRC and of the process for developing recommendations;
2. a set of recommendations for proper research of the EMSW Ancestral Remains;
3. a set of recommendations for proper memorialization and interment of the EMSW Ancestral Remains; and
4. a set of broad recommendations that fall outside the scope of research, memorialization and interment.

The FRC will produce a final report that describes in greater detail the context and process of its work, the principles and concepts that guided various decision-making processes, and the rationales for all recommendations.

OVERVIEW OF THE FAMILY REPRESENTATIVE COUNCIL (FRC)

Background. The EMSW Ancestral Remains were found in 1994 as a result of Medical College of Virginia (now VCU Medical Center) construction activity. Excavation in preparation of building construction for the Hermes A. Kontos Medical Sciences Building located at 1200 East Marshall Street led to the uncovering of the well and the discovery of physical remains of over 50 individuals.

Skeletal analysis reveals that these were people, mainly of African descent, who had been discarded into the well following their use as cadavers for medical training in dissection and amputation. Archaeology suggests that use of the well dates to the pre-Civil War period. Thus, at least some of the ancestral remains are likely to be those of enslaved children, women and men. Over 400 artifacts and animal remains were also found. Construction of the Kontos Building was not adequately halted for systematic archaeological investigation. For the sake of economic expediency, the well was covered hastily without being fully excavated. It is likely that additional remains still rest at this site.

The EMSW Project acknowledges these dehumanizing practices surrounding the well during the 19th century and the 1990s. Importantly, the project further acknowledges that efforts to redress these practices can only be successful with community input and guidance. It is within this context that the FRC was established as a body of surrogate or symbolic EMSW descendants.

FRC Goals, Structure and Process. The FRC was convened in August of 2015 with the charge “to represent the ‘descendant community’ of the human remains discovered in a well near East Marshall Street and to make recommendations to the VCU EMSW Planning Committee to support the appropriate study, memorialization, and reburial with dignity.” The FRC consists of 10 voting members and a non-voting special advisor/ liaison to the Planning Committee. Voting members were selected by the Planning Committee from a pool of individuals nominated during public engagement forums, or “Community Consultations.” The voting members are:

- Stacy Burrs
- Jennifer Early
- Lillie A. Estes
- Carmen Foster
- Christopher Green
- Joseph Jones
- Crystal Noakes
- Rhonda Keyes Pleasants
- Stephanie Smith
- Janet “Queen Nzinga” Taylor

Rev. Dr. J. Elisha Burke served as special advisor / liaison to the Planning Committee. Dr. Joseph Jones served as FRC chairperson.

To carry out their charge, FRC members divided into three working groups. The Research Working Group consisted of Noakes (Leader), Early, Estes and Jones. The Memorialization Working Group consisted of Burrs (Leader), Green, Smith and Taylor. The Interment Working Group was comprised of Pleasants (Leader), Foster and Taylor.

The work of the FRC progressed through several steps necessary for the development of the recommendations that appear in this report. The first step was to review the large amount of data gathered during the first four Community Consultations. This step was critical for ensuring our goals and perspectives fundamentally reflected those of the broader community. The next step entailed developing principles and frameworks useful for guiding deliberations and decisions-making processes. As working groups presented their frameworks to one another, the need to share ideas and information across groups became apparent.

Also needed at this point was expert input from people familiar with the excavation of the well, the Ancestral Remains, and/or culturally appropriate forms of research, memorialization and interment. Thus, a third step in drafting recommendations involved hosting guest speakers and taking educational trips. FRC members visited Jamestown, the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History (where the Ancestral Remains are located), the New York African Burial Ground, and the Kontos Building among other places. Finally, with benefit of these experiences, FRC members drafted the recommendations for research, memorialization and interment of the EMSW Ancestral Remains that appear in the remaining sections of this report.

The work of the FRC was conducted with unfailing logistical support from Gwen Whiting and Brandon Mayo of Justice & Sustainability Associates and Stephen Davenport of the Office of the President, VCU.

RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

The Research Working Group of the FRC was established “to put forth recommendations for future research (if any) to be conducted with the skeletal remains discovered in the EMSW.” Working Group members conceptualized research in a broad context, i.e., as a process to discover new knowledge with the potential to solve social problems (Ravitch and Riggins, 2011). Moreover, this Working Group approached this task from the perspective that scientific research reflects social and historical contexts and political ideologies. Research, therefore, has the capacity to challenge or to reproduce ideologies and inequalities (LaRoche and Blakey, 1997). Accordingly, a community-based model should be central to any future studies. The research recommendations are as follows.

The Family Representative Council recommends:

- 1. additional study of the history of the East Marshall Street Well site in relation to the broader experiences of Africans and African Americans in Richmond.**
- 2. additional study to understand the long-term implications, impacts, and relevance of the East Marshall Street Well site history for contemporary African American medical experiences.**
- 3. DNA and microbial analysis of the East Marshall Street Well Ancestral Remains for the specific purpose of reconstructing (1) regional genetic ancestry, (2) molecular sex of juveniles, (3) health environments, and (4) possible biological relationships of EMSW Ancestors and a targeted sample of living individuals.**
- 4. establishment of the “EMSW Research Advisory Board” to assist with Request for Proposal (RFP) development and vetting and selection of future research proposals.**

Research related to the EMSW and the ancestral remains should be led by scholars experienced in the community-engaged study of African and African diasporic history, medical experiences, and biology. VCU should provide institutional support to fund qualified scholars and supportive personnel. Institutional support from VCU will include responsibility for administering necessary RFP processes and funding of selected proposals. Research designs should incorporate STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) and other training components for future and emerging researchers from historically disadvantaged groups with a particular focus on African Americans.

It is anticipated that research will be completed within a time frame that will allow for research findings to inform the interment ceremony and the initial phase of memorialization (see “Memorialization Recommendations”).

MEMORIALIZATION AND INTERMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

The Memorialization Working Group was tasked with developing recommendations for appropriate memorials and ceremonies to honor the ancestral remains found in the East Marshall Street Well during the construction of the Kontos Building, located on the VCU Medical Center Campus. The Interment Working Group had the specific task of developing recommendations for the interment or burial of the ancestral remains. These two working groups initially met separately to develop recommendations. However, the need to collaborate across groups became increasingly apparent as questions and considerations for memorialization and interment overlapped substantially. Eventually, the two working groups combined their efforts formally. Reflecting this development, recommendations for memorialization and interment are presented together in this section of the report.

Memorialization Recommendations

Two distinct locations have been identified as appropriate locations for physical memorialization: the Kontos Building and the interment site. Each site has distinct features.

The Family Representative Council recommends:

- 1. memorializing the experiences of the EMSW Ancestors at four locations within or near the Kontos Building.** Memorialization should include: (1) an outdoor memorial between the Kontos and Egyptian Buildings; (2) commemorative artwork and adequate signage outside of the Kontos Building Auditorium; (3) facial reconstructions of EMSW Ancestral Remains and additional artwork on the first floor of the Kontos Building; and (4) a physical marker as near as possible to the exact location of the well. See Appendix A for sample memorialization artwork from the African Burial Ground in New York City.
- 2. construction of a significantly appropriate Memorial and an Interactive Learning Center at the site of interment.** The memorial shall include a physically and aesthetically impressive structure in which or around which individuals and gather to contemplate issues of historic and contemporary significance. The memorial should be both solemn and celebratory in its impact. The memorial must also interact appropriately with the interment of the ancestral remains. Artists and architects from around the world should be invited to compete for the honor of creating these important monuments. See Appendix B for sample memorialization artwork from the African Burial Ground in New York City.
- 3. an annual memorialization practice that VCU medical students conduct prior to their anatomy class to pay respect to those who are contributing and have contributed their remains for the benefit of their scientific learning.**

The appropriate memorials for the EMSW Ancestors at the Kontos Building and the interment site will be identified through an RFP process. VCU will be responsible for administering the RFP process and funding selected proposals. FRC members will serve as reviewers of all proposals. It is anticipated that physical memorialization efforts may occur in at least two phases, commencing at the (VCU-owned) Kontos Building and continuing with construction at the interment site.

Interment Recommendations

The EMSW Ancestors were discarded into the Well after medical students used their bodies for training in anatomy and dissection. African American oral history suggests that some of these individuals even may have been killed for the specific purpose of supplying cadavers for medical training. Thus, at least some of the EMSW Ancestral Remains had likely never been interred or deliberately buried with the possible exception of bodies acquired through grave robbing or “resurrectionist” activity (Koste, 2012; Utsey, 2011; Washington, 2006). As such, the Family Representative Council will oversee the proper *interment* or burial of these, our ancestral remains. The recommendations speak to interment location, preparation and ceremony.

The Family Representative Council recommends:

- 1. interment of the EMSW Ancestral Remains and associated artifacts underground at the African Burial Ground located in the City of Richmond.** Located near the intersection of 16th and Broad Streets and Interstate 95, the African Burial Ground is perhaps the earliest site in Richmond designated for burial of enslaved and free Africans. This is a sacred site of tremendous historical importance, reverence, and cultural significance to the city’s African American community (see Appendix C).

An alternative burial location is Evergreen Cemetery located on the Richmond/Henrico County line. This is a venue where notable African Americans and/or individuals of African descent are currently interred. Evergreen Cemetery has a notable history as a premier cemetery site since 1891 for distinguished African American Richmonders such as Maggie Lena Walker, John Mitchell, Jr., A.D. Price, Rosa L. Dixon Bowser, and J. Andrew Bowler.

In the event that Evergreen is not a feasible site, VCU will take responsibility, in conjunction with the FRC, and in consultation with site location and development experts, for the determination of an alternate site. Necessary procurement and funding for purchase and maintenance of such property would be led by Virginia Commonwealth University, in consultation with the FRC, to secure collaboration, coordination, and support from corporate, religious, private, and community organization contributions and sponsorships.

- 2. that coffin boxes designed and crafted by West African artisans shall contain the ancestral remains and artifacts that were found with the remains. No outer burial container shall be used when interring the remains.** These particular ancestral remains, most likely, are those of Africans and their descendants who arrived in antebellum Richmond when the city served as the notorious commercial center for the trans-Atlantic trade in enslaved Africans. As such, historically appropriate West African customs and burial traditions will be important features for this long overdue interment or burial to ensure “The Rites of Ancestral Return” are evident (see Appendix D).
- 3. that the Interment Ceremony be designed by funerary experts in West African burial traditions in consultation with the FRC.** In order to cast a broad net for diverse, innovative, and authentic expertise, the ceremony should be designed by a diverse group of experts. These experts should be a combination of both national and local experts and should be ethnically diverse, particularly consisting of African and African American descent. This ceremony will be intentionally inclusive to honor a variety of faith traditions to include African indigenous practices. This ceremony will be open to the public and appropriately advertised in the media.

Experts selected to design the coffins and to plan the Interment Ceremony will be identified through an RFP process. VCU will be responsible for administering the RFP process and funding selected proposals. FRC members will serve as reviewers of all proposals.

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ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations may extend beyond the project's Research, Memorialization and Interment framework but are deemed vitally important to the integrity of the EMSW Project going forward.

The Family Representative Council recommends:

- 1. renaming the EMSW Project.** The new name for this project should more accurately and clearly reflect the EMSW Ancestors' cultural identities and histories. The name should capture their collective symbolic significance for the descendant and broader communities and for VCU. A process of community consultation should be developed for the purpose of soliciting potential new names for the project.
- 2. that VCU determine the feasibility: (1) of exploring whether other EMSW Ancestors are located beneath the Kontos Building and, if so, (2) of excavating their remains and associated artifacts.** These determinations should be completed and made public within a time frame allowing for incorporation of findings into interment and/or memorialization efforts.
- 3. continuation of its advisory role into and beyond the implementation phase of this project.** As indicated in previous sections, the FRC anticipates a role in the review of proposals during the implementation phase. Beyond this, the presence of the FRC as a distinct entity signals VCU's commitment to sustained community engagement as an ideal.

REFERENCES

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- Utsey, S. (2011). "Until the Well Runs Dry: Medicine and the Exploitation of Black Bodies." Burn Baby Burn Productions. United States of America.
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APPENDIX A



Sample interior memorial artwork:

New York African Burial Ground: “New Ring Shout”

APPENDIX B



Sample memorial:

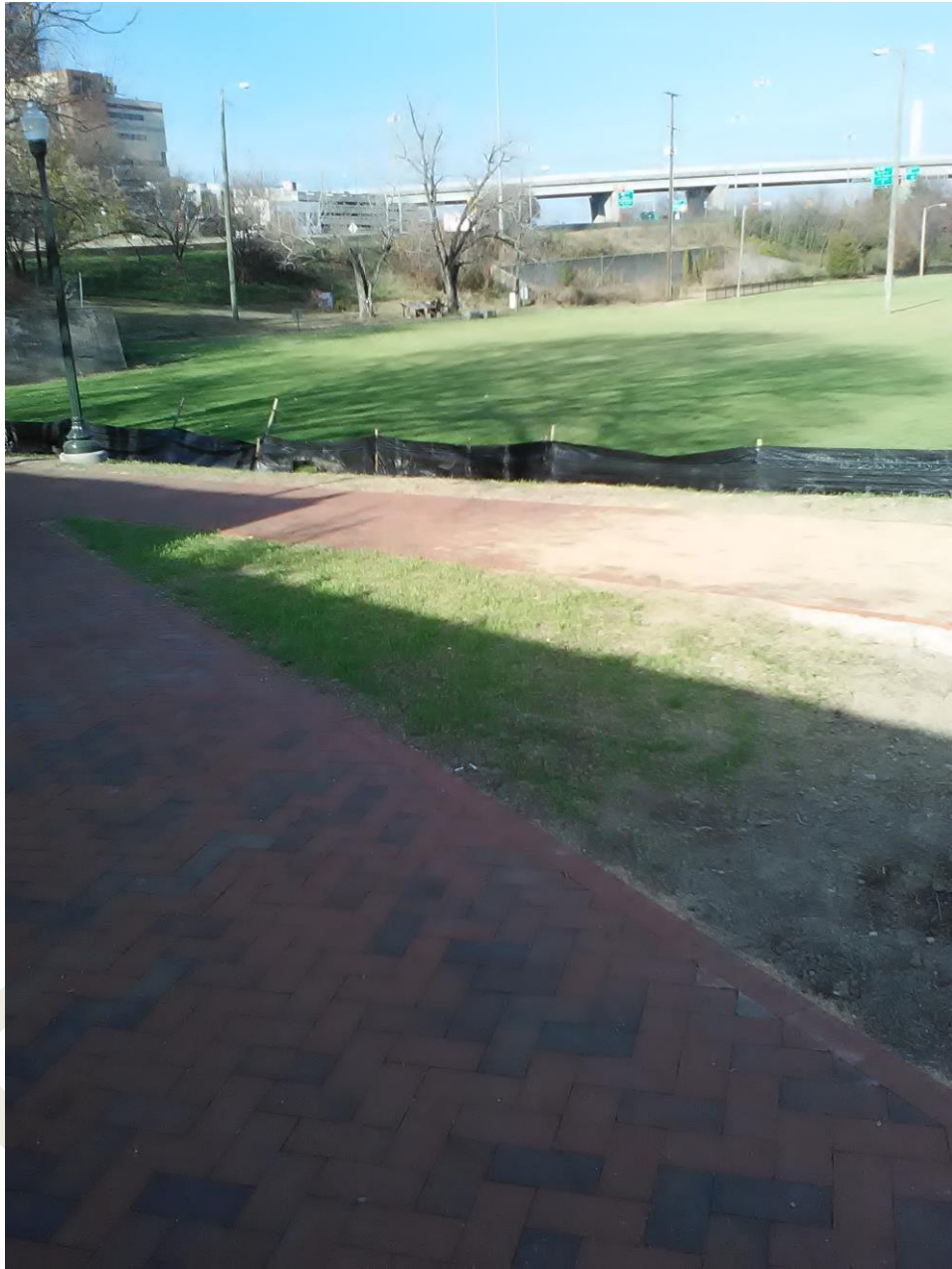
African Burial Ground National Monument: "Door of Return"

APPENDIX C



Sample coffin designed by Ghanaian artisans for New York African Burial Ground Ancestral Remains

APPENDIX D



Proposed site of interment:

Richmond African Burial Ground