

**Recommendations for Research, Memorialization and Interment of  
the East Marshall Street Well Ancestral Remains**

**Report Prepared by VCU East Marshall Street Well  
Family Representative Council**

**Submitted to VCU East Marshall Street Well Planning Committee**

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We sincerely thank the concerned members of the public who engaged with this effort through the community consultation process. We have strived to represent you faithfully and to honor the trust that you placed in us.

Most importantly, we acknowledge the Ancestors – those children, women and men recovered from the East Marshall Well and those whose physical remains may still reside at the site of their desecration. May our collective actions now and tomorrow help bring you the justice, peace and respect that you were denied, even in death.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides a summary of work completed by the Family Representative Council (FRC) as part of Virginia Commonwealth University's (VCU) East Marshall Street Well (EMSW) Project. The FRC was established for the purpose of developing recommendations for proper research, memorialization and interment of human skeletal remains and artifacts found in 1994 on the campus of MCV, now VCU School of Medicine. Previous research suggests the skeletal remains represent over 50 individuals, mostly Africans and African Americans, who were discarded into the 19<sup>th</sup>-century EMSW following their use as cadavers for medical training.

This final report expands upon an interim report presented to the EMSW Project Planning Committee and the Richmond community in 2016. This document consists of: (1) a project overview, including a description of the FRC's structure, goals and process for developing its recommendations; (2) the recommendations proposed to guide future research, memorialization and interment activities; and (3) concluding remarks that situate the project and its potential impact within the current context of social activism and reflection concerning issues of race and historical memory.

The FRC's formal recommendations are listed below. It is understood that all approved research, memorialization and interment activities will occur in phases through funding secured by VCU.

### **Research Recommendations:**

1. Return of all Ancestral Remains to the City of Richmond;
2. VCU should determine the feasibility of locating and retrieving EMSW Ancestors possibly still located beneath the Kontos Building;
3. No further analysis of the Ancestral Remains or associated artifacts should take place prior to approval of an EMSW Project research agenda developed with community input.
4. Future analysis of artifacts associated with the EMSW Ancestors should involve only nondestructive methods;
5. Research should include study of the long-term implications, impacts, and relevance of the East Marshall Street Well site history for contemporary African American medical experiences;
6. DNA and microbial analysis of the Ancestral Remains should be undertaken for the specific purposes of: (1) reconstructing regional genetic ancestry; (2) assessing molecular sex of juveniles; (3) reconstructing health environments; and (4) identifying possible biological relationships with a targeted sample of living descendants; and
7. VCU should establish an "EMSW Research Steering Committee" to assist with Request for Proposal (RFP) development and the vetting and selection of proposals.

### **Memorialization Recommendations:**

1. Physical memorialization of the EMSW Ancestors and their experiences at four locations within or near the Kontos Building. Most immediately, VCU should place signage indicating the excavation location and historical significance of the Ancestral Remains near the building entrance;

2. Construction of a significantly appropriate Memorial and an Interactive Learning Center at the site of interment;
3. VCU should establish an annual memorialization event to be observed by all medical students prior to undertaking their first anatomy class;
4. VCU should develop formal guidelines for appropriate university actions, including community engagement, in the event of future discovery of human skeletal remains or material culture;
5. VCU should establish an “EMSW Memorialization Steering Committee” to assist with Request for Proposal (RFP) development and the vetting and selection of proposals; and
6. VCU should initiate a formal study of: (1) the legacy of slavery within the history of the university and (2) mechanisms for redressing this legacy.

**Interment Recommendations:**

1. Interment of all EMSW Ancestral Remains and associated artifacts underground at the African Burial Ground located in the City of Richmond;
2. An Interment Ceremony designed by funerary experts in western African burial traditions in consultation with the FRC;
3. Coffin boxes designed and crafted by West African artisans for burial of the Ancestral Remains and related artifacts; and
4. VCU should establish an “EMSW Interment Steering Committee” to assist with Request for Proposal (RFP) development and the vetting and selection of proposals.

## INTRODUCTION

This final report provides a summary of work completed by the Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) East Marshall Street Well (EMSW) Family Representative Council (FRC). It includes FRC recommendations for proper research, memorialization and interment of the Ancestral Remains and associated artifacts that were recovered in 1994 as a result of construction activity on the campus of Medical College of Virginia (MCV).

The report is divided into four sections:

1. Overview of the historical background of the EMSW Project and the FRC's goals, structure, and process for developing its recommendations;
2. Recommendations for proper research of the EMSW Ancestral Remains;
3. Recommendations for proper memorialization and interment of the EMSW Ancestral Remains; and
4. Concluding remarks.

The FRC recommendations for research, memorialization and interment were presented in draft form to the EMSW Project Planning Committee and the broader Richmond community in 2016. This final report updates and expands upon the draft report. It includes several new recommendations. The final report also provides additional information with respect to the evolving context and process of the FRC's work, including its overarching vision and the principles and rationales that guided various decisions for all recommendations.

**A brief note on language...** The reader will note throughout this document certain writing conventions employed with the intent of conferring upon our ancestors respect that they were denied in life. Toward this end, unless citing the work of others or formal names (e.g., "The Mount Vernon Slave Cemetery"), we have opted to use the term "enslaved African" instead of "slave," "negro," etc. in order to denote the contested but extant humanity of our ancestors. Similarly, we use the terms "EMSW Ancestors" and "Ancestral Remains" when referring specifically to individuals recovered from or possibly still located at the well site.

## OVERVIEW OF THE FAMILY REPRESENTATIVE COUNCIL (FRC)

**Background.** The EMSW Ancestral Remains were found in 1994 as a result of construction activity on the campus of MCV, now VCU School of Medicine. 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 a mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century well (see Figure 1). Contained within the well were physical remains of over 50 individuals: at least 44 adults (ages 15 years and older) and 9 children (ages 14 years and younger) (Owsley and Bruwelheide, 2012). Also recovered from the well shaft and its immediate vicinity were 423 mostly fragmentary artifacts – including medical tools, ceramics, and fabric among other items – and animal remains.

Unfortunately, the EMSW Ancestral Remains and artifacts were not recovered through systematic archaeological excavation (see Griego, 2015). Instead, upon identification of human remains, construction workers dug the well feature by backhoe to a depth of 30 feet and university archaeologists were allotted insufficient time for proper retrieval of skeletal remains and artifacts from the backfill. The human remains were transported to the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History where they are currently located. The artifacts and animal remains are located at the Virginia Department of Historic Resources. It is quite likely that additional human remains and artifacts are still located beneath the Kontos Building in the estimated ten-foot unexcavated portion of the well feature.

Skeletal, archaeological and historical analyses suggest the skeletal remains were discarded into the well following their use as cadavers for training in dissection and amputation. Owsley and Bruwelheide (2012) identify most of the human remains as those of African Americans. They report cut mark patterns on bones consistent with anatomical instruction and training rather than professional surgical intervention or autopsy. Artifact analysis supports this interpretation, dating the well to the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early years of the nearby Egyptian Building, which opened in 1844 to house the Medical Department of Hampden-Sydney College (MDHSC), later MCV (Outlaw, 2012). Archival records further specify the well's use as a "sink" for disposal of "medical waste," including human remains, from as early as 1848 until 1860 when MCV became a state institution (Koste, 2012). Given this antebellum time frame, it is likely that at least some of the human remains recovered from the EMSW are those of enslaved children, women and men.

These initial findings of the EMSW Project are profoundly unsettling, even if certain aspects are not surprising to those familiar with the nation's history of medical racism. It is well documented that early development and professionalization of American medical practice relied heavily upon exploitation of African Americans and other socioeconomically vulnerable segments of the population. For example, the work of historians Daina Ramey Berry (2017, 2018) and Craig Steven Wilder (2013) among others has revealed an interregional network of medical schools engaged in grave robbing and cadaver trading that disproportionately targeted African Americans. School administrators and professors sometimes procured corpses themselves. More often, they deployed students, employees and enslaved laborers as "resurrectionists" tasked with retrieving bodies from local graveyards, funeral homes, hospitals and back alleys and other sources. Though illegal and responded to with organized violence, this practice thrived as medical schools competed for the prestige and profits increasingly associated with cadaver-based anatomical training. Eventually, public officials passed legislation designed to reduce or eliminate the traffic in dead bodies (Sappol, 2002). These "anatomy





Figure 1. Hermes A. Kontos Medical Sciences Building, site of the East Marshall Street Well. acts” or “bone bills” granted medical researchers legal access to “unclaimed” bodies of those who died in hospitals and whose families could not afford burial costs.

The discovery and continued unethical treatment of the EMSW Ancestral Remains was a disturbing reminder of the local history of “postmortem racism” (Blakely and Harrington, 1997). MDHSC faculty promoted antebellum Richmond as ideal for anatomical study in part because they had at their disposal a large population of enslaved and segregated African Americans. According to VCU historian Jodi Koste (2012), resurrectionists frequently targeted Richmond’s potter’s field and the “Negro burial ground” as well as the state penitentiary and its convict cemetery, all of which were located just over a mile from the medical college. Nor was grave robbing necessarily the only means of obtaining bodies.

In 1840, the Medical College of Virginia publicly flourished a plan wherein it predicted, ‘The number of negroes employed in our factories will furnish materials for the support of an extensive hospital, and afford to the student that great desideratum – clinical instruction.’

Throughout the South, medical schools published circulars exhorting slave owners to send them patients. The schools established hospitals for blacks, where fees were lowered dramatically or dropped altogether, and advertisements for the free care of sick and aged slaves were placed in rural newspapers (Washington, 2006: 107).

Enslaved Africans were not the sole targets of this particular form of medical racism. Whether enslaved or free, simply being a patient at MCV and other southern medical schools may well have put African Americans at risk for becoming “material” for clinical instruction. Many African Americans of the time

(and since) held this view, which was discounted as “superstition” in an 1854 editorial of *The Daily Dispatch* (Koste, 2012).

We may never know with certainty whether the bodies of specific EMSW Ancestors were obtained through illegal grave robbing or as a result of “dying while black” in a medical school infirmary. What can be reasonably assumed, however, is that the EMSW Ancestors did not voluntarily contribute their bodies as “gifts” for medical instruction. The option to refuse likely did not exist in the context of antebellum Richmond where African American bodies could be taken by force when clandestine body snatching failed. From this more sobering perspective, Berry (2018) offers an alternative approach to understanding how the Ancestral Remains came to be in the well. She frames the cadaver trade as an extension of slavery through which owners continued reaping profits and the suffering of the enslaved persisted even beyond the grave.

Through the EMSW Project, VCU acknowledges the dehumanizing practices surrounding the well during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the 1990s. Importantly, the project further acknowledges the need to rectify these practices and that efforts to do so can only be successful with community input and guidance. Toward this end, VCU engaged with community members to establish the FRC as a body of surrogate or symbolic descendants of the EMSW Ancestors. The remainder of this section provides a description of the FRC – its composition, vision, and the steps taken to produce its final recommendations.

**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.” Voting members were selected by the Planning Committee from a pool of individuals nominated during public engagement forums, or “Community Consultations.” The FRC consists of the following ten voting members and a non-voting special advisor/liaison to the Planning Committee (see figure 2).

- 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. Mr. Stephen Davenport facilitated logistical support from the VCU Office of the President. Project Manager Gwendolyn Whiting and Brandon Mayo provided project management and technical assistance, respectively, from Justice & Sustainability Associates. 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.



From this point, the work of the FRC progressed through three key steps necessary for the development of the final recommendations that appear in this report. *The first step was to synthesize and review feedback gathered from the first four Community Consultations.* These public meetings generated a large amount of data as concerned community members weighed in on various topics and concerns related to the EMSW and the Ancestral Remains. Discussion topics ranged from whether the well should have been dug deeper for recovery of more individuals to the types of scientific analysis available for skeletal research to the possibilities for linking memorialization efforts to contemporary racial justice issues.

The review of community feedback was critical for ensuring our vision and goals for this phase of the project fundamentally aligned with and accurately reflected those of the broader community. While the FRC is rather homogeneous with respect to race/ethnicity and gender – i.e., comprised mostly of African American women – like any human group, it is also internally diverse in some respects. Our membership includes native and non-native Richmonders; activists, community and business leaders, and educators; and of course people of varied political and religious backgrounds. What linked the FRC members was a sense of responsibility to the EMSW Ancestors and a shared vision of the EMSW Project as a vehicle for

Figure 2: FRC members, from left to right: Stacy Burrs, Christopher Rashad, Lillie Estes, Stephanie Smith, Jennifer Early, Carmen Foster, Joseph Jones and Crystal Noakes. Also pictured are Brandon Mayo (JSA, kneeling), Don Edwards (JSA, rear and center) and Stephen Davenport (VCU, far right). Not pictured are FRC members Rhonda Pleasants and Janet “Queen Nzinga” Taylor.

social accountability and restorative or “retrospective” justice (Walters, 2017). Our overarching goal was to develop a roadmap for reincorporating our ancestors into the community in a way that profoundly honors their humanity, experiences and legacy.

*The next step entailed developing a set of principles that would inform and guide collective decision-making processes.* FRC members agreed that future research, memorialization, and interment activities should

- be respectful of, and minimally invasive to, the EMSW Ancestors;
- be respectful of, and ethically responsible to, the descendant community;
- follow relevant professional ethical standards, involving minimal risk and endeavoring to “do no harm” to the descendant community;
- actively seek to honor the deceased and the descendent community;
- generate new knowledge that benefits society by increasing informed dialogue about the EMSW and related issues;
- reflect and incorporate best practices of community input; and
- include public education and training components that target descendent community members.

These general principles provided an ethical framework that structured deliberations within and across Working Groups. Issues, questions and concerns specific to the goals of particular Working Groups are discussed in the following sections.

*The third and final key step in preparation for developing recommendations involved educational trips and a series of conversations with individuals who had either direct experience with the EMSW Ancestors or expertise relevant to our goal of honoring them.* To gather information, FRC members visited

- the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History where Drs. Douglas Owsley and Kari Bruwelheide facilitated a viewing of the Ancestral Remains;
- the Virginia Department of Historic Resources where the staff gave an overview of the EMSW artifacts and faunal remains located there;
- Historic Jamestowne where we toured the Archaearium (an interpretive archaeology museum) and heard from Dr. Merry Outlaw about her analysis of artifacts from the EMSW site;
- the New York African Burial Ground in Lower Manhattan where a project similar in nature to the EMSW Project resulted in reburial and memorialization of over 400 enslaved Africans; and
- the Kontos Building where FRC members surveyed possible locations for memorialization.

The VCU Office of the President hosted in-person and tele-/videoconferenced meetings with the following individuals.

- Dr. Christopher Egghart of the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality shared his experience as part of the team that retrieved the Ancestral Remains from the Kontos Building construction site.
- Black Heritage Trail of New Hampshire Executive Director JerriAnne Boggis provided information on the memorialization of the unmarked “negro burying ground” in Portsmouth, NH. This process involved mayoral appointment of a Blue Ribbon Committee and establishment of a trust fund for solicitation of private donations for the cost of transforming the street into a public park with a memorial.
- Howard University Professor of Biology and Director of the Cobb Research Laboratory Dr. Fatimah Jackson discussed possible avenues of genetic research, including the possibility of identifying living descendants of EMSW Ancestors and related bioethics.

Finally, with benefit of these experiences and additional research conducted by the Working Groups, FRC members drafted recommendations for research, memorialization and interment of the EMSW Ancestral Remains. The draft recommendations were presented to the members of the EMSW Planning Committee

and to the public during the fifth Community Consultation in 2016. Feedback received from those events informed the final recommendations included in this report.

## 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.” The task began with consideration of several basic issues and questions. Most fundamentally, the FRC recognized that the EMSW Ancestors did not voluntarily donate their bodies for scientific discovery, but were exploited for this purpose in death. Given this, some FRC members initially were critical of the idea of endorsing additional skeletal research. Invasive analysis such as that required in genetics seemed especially problematic.

Ultimately, however, we took our cue from the broader community consultations. We adopted the position that there is more worth learning through scientific analysis of the Ancestral Remains in conjunction with further study of the historical and social context of the EMSW. While science cannot undo the disregard for human dignity bestowed upon these individuals, it may help us to more fully understand them as human beings living under conditions of extreme oppression.

At the same time, we realized that research agendas detached from contemporary community interests can perpetuate exploitative practices of yesterday. We approached our task acknowledging that scientific research, though typically understood to be objective, often reflects social contexts and political ideologies. Research, therefore, has the capacity to link past and present experiences by challenging or reproducing social inequalities (LaRoche and Blakey, 1997). From this perspective, important questions emerged. Who benefits from the study of African Americans (or any group)? Who is most vulnerable to the real risks associated with being defined and categorized through biology? How have these issues been addressed to date and have they been addressed adequately? Perhaps research should take place, but research for and by whom, and to what end?

Challenged by such questions, we conceptualized research for this project broadly, *as a process to discover new knowledge with the potential to solve social problems* (Ravitch and Riggins, 2011). We also identified some basic concepts that should inform the EMSW Project research plan. This conceptual framework draws on best practices established in fields such as public health and anthropology, most notably the New York African Burial Ground Project that pioneered community-based bioarchaeology (i.e., the study of human remains from archaeological contexts) (Blakey and Rankin-Hill, 2009). The framework will help to ensure continuity with steps already taken by VCU to maintain a high degree of public accountability and transparency.

- Future research should be **cross-institutional**, i.e., conducted by both VCU and non-VCU-affiliated scholars, in order to promote confidence in the independence of research findings for a broad public audience.
- Future research should be **interdisciplinary**. We envision social and natural scientists working together with experts from the arts and humanities to raise and answer questions from multiple and integrated perspectives.
- The research team should be **diverse and inclusive** of people from traditionally underserved communities, particularly African Americans whose ancestors were targeted by the unethical practices surrounding the EMSW. Research designs should incorporate STEM-H (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics and Health) and other training opportunities, toward the

development and support of educational opportunities for future and emerging researchers from historically disadvantaged groups.

- Future studies should be conducted with an appropriate level of **community engagement** that includes a commitment to broad dissemination of research findings (further explained below). Broadly defined, the goal of community-engaged research is to equitably involve community members in the research process, combining their strengths and expertise with those of academics (Hartwig, Calleson, & Williams, 2006). *Of the various approaches to community-engaged research, the FRC specifically calls for adoption of community-based participatory research (CBPR) methods.* The CBPR approach involves partnership development, negotiation, and accountability to community members who may engage throughout the research process – from the design of the research, to answering questions, to sharing findings (Stanton, 2012). Future research might specifically engage, but is not limited to engaging, possible descendants of the individuals discovered.
- A critical component of community-engaged research is the **broad dissemination** of research findings in forms that are readily accessible and easily understood by the general public. Findings also should translate quickly into practical application. Beyond scholarly publications and conference presentations, broad dissemination may occur through web-based platforms, social media, infographics, news stories, policy briefs, and other mechanisms. Public forums and events sponsored by the university may also serve as dissemination platforms, as may curricular materials. FRC members feel strongly that the project deliverables should include age-appropriate education modules developed for the pre-kindergarten through undergraduate levels. Given the particular historical context of the well, project findings should be incorporated into VCU's pre-health curriculum.

It is expected that this process will combine original research and synthesis of existing literature on topics such as antebellum African American living conditions, medical exploitation, and burial practices in the Richmond area. This undertaking will support proper, historically informed reburial and memorialization of the EMSW Ancestors and will help to answer a number of important questions such as:

- What were the most likely African ethnic and cultural backgrounds of individual EMSW Ancestors?
- What do we know about the material or physical quality of their living circumstances?
- What more is there to be learned through further historical investigation of the EMSW site?
- How does the story of the well fit into a broader investigation of medical exploitation of African Americans?
- How can study of the EMSW site contribute to an even broader understanding of enslaved and free African American life in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Richmond?
- What are the long-term and contemporary implications of the practices surrounding the well for generations of African American Richmonders, e.g., in terms of medical distrust, health decisions and outcomes? What have been implications for VCU/MCV?

These are sample questions. The actual research questions and plan should be developed with community input.

Specific research recommendations follow.



**The Family Representative Council recommends:**

- 1. Return of all Ancestral Remains to Richmond.** Upon careful consideration, the FRC feels strongly that VCU should facilitate the prompt return of our EMSW Ancestors currently located at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History and the proper curation of their skeletal remains at VCU or some other appropriate state institution (e.g., Virginia Department of Historic Resources) until their interment.
- 2. VCU determine the feasibility of locating and retrieving EMSW Ancestors possibly still located beneath the Kontos Building.** If additional human remains are located and found to be retrievable, VCU should excavate the human remains and associated artifacts. These determinations should be completed and made public within a time frame allowing for their incorporation into research, interment and/or memorialization efforts.
- 3. No further analysis of the Ancestral Remains or associated artifacts should take place prior to approval of an EMSW Project research agenda developed with community input.** This recommendation includes duplication procedures (e.g., 3D Printing) that perhaps may be applied at some later date.
- 4. Future analysis of artifacts associated with the EMSW Ancestors should involve only nondestructive methods.** The unsystematic recovery of the artifacts to some degree limits their interpretation. Still, their analysis may yield important information. Only nondestructive methods of analysis and duplication should be applied to the EMSW artifacts prior to their interment with the ancestral remains.
- 5. Additional study of the long-term implications, impacts, and relevance of the East Marshall Street Well site history for contemporary African American medical experiences.** In her seminal 2006 book *Medical Apartheid*, Harriet Washington notes that exploitation of African Americans at MCV was not limited to the antebellum era. A century after the well became a depository for human remains, MCV researchers studying the effects of radiation on skin color induced third-degree burns to patients at Dooley and St. Philip Hospitals, which served African American children and adults, respectively. Oral history, archival research, ethnography, and other forms of study should be employed to contextualize skeletal research and to further illuminate the history and legacy of medical distrust and other issues related to the EMSW.
- 6. DNA and microbial analysis of the Ancestral Remains should be undertaken for the specific purposes of: (1) reconstructing regional genetic ancestry; (2) assessing molecular sex of juveniles; (3) reconstructing health environments; and (4) identifying possible biological relationships with a targeted sample of living descendants.** Despite strong consensus from the Community Consultations in favor of genetic research, FRC members shared serious concerns with respect to possible misuse of genetic information as well as heightened expectations for identifying living descendants. A leading anthropological geneticist addressed these ethical concerns, affirming the ability to protect the privacy of living individuals while pursuing research that reflects community needs and interests.



7. **VCU establish an “EMSW Research Steering Committee” to assist with Request for Proposal (RFP) development and the vetting and selection of proposals.** Appropriate research proposals should be identified through an RFP process. VCU should administer the process and provide institutional support necessary for securing funding for selected proposals. The Steering Committee should encourage proposals from scholars with significant experience in community-engaged study of African diasporic history, biology, and medical experiences. The Steering Committee should include FRC representation.

VCU should assume responsibility for administering the RFP process and securing funding for selected proposals. The university should also provide institutional support for qualified scholars and project personnel.

It is difficult to estimate when the recommended research might be completed. This is because different studies will proceed on different timetables as appropriate resources and methods are identified and developed. For example, genetic research will require development of bioethics protocols and sampling strategies for interacting with community members prior to any analysis. Studies that do not require such extensive measures may be initiated sooner. Therefore, it is anticipated that research will occur in phases. Ultimately, research findings will be necessary to inform most memorialization and interment efforts.

## 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 construction of the Kontos Building, located on the VCU Medical Center Campus. The Interment Working Group was charged with developing recommendations for the interment or burial of the ancestral remains.

Over time, the need to collaborate across Working Groups became apparent as the issues being considered overlapped extensively. Eventually, members of both Working Groups combined their efforts formally. Thus, recommendations for memorialization and interment are presented together in this third section of the report.

FRC members again had to address some basic questions and contradictions. For example, there was the question of *what*, exactly, should be memorialized? The EMSW Ancestors represent the hidden foundation of American medical science. Yet, to honor their “contributions” to medicine without honoring the struggle against slavery is problematic. This seems disingenuous and somewhat of an apologist stance toward those who actually discarded them in the well. Another problem is that we did not know which of the EMSW Ancestors had been buried prior to entering the “cadaver trade.” African American oral history suggests that living individuals also could be abducted for the purpose of supplying cadavers for medical training. If true, at least some of the EMSW Ancestors may never have been deliberately buried. How should the issue of burial versus reburial influence memorialization efforts and the interment ceremony? What are the nature and long-term goals of memorialization and interment in this context?

Questions such as these underscored our responsibilities as symbolic family to these now-nameless children, women and men. For the FRC, memorialization and respectful interment of Ancestral Remains are understood as important elements in a larger process of restorative justice. This process involves public remembrance and commemoration and two distinct locations have been identified as appropriate for physical memorialization: the Kontos Building and the future interment site. This process also requires systematic redress of past misdeeds. The recommendations in this section reflect this approach. They reflect the FRC’s desire to see properly honored not only the bodies of our EMSW Ancestors – those excavated and those possibly still beneath the Kontos Building – but also their experiences and legacies.

The specific recommendations for memorialization and interment follow.

### **Memorialization Recommendations**

**The Family Representative Council recommends:**

- 1. Physical memorialization of the EMSW Ancestors and their experiences at four locations within or near the Kontos Building. Most immediately, VCU should place signage indicating the excavation location and historical significance of the Ancestral Remains near the building entrance.** Additional memorialization should include: (1) an outdoor memorial between the Kontos and Egyptian Buildings; (2) commemorative artwork and adequate signage near the entrance of the Kontos Building Auditorium; (3) facial reconstructions of EMSW

Ancestors 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 Appendices A and B for sample memorials.

- 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 may gather for contemplation. The memorial must interact appropriately with the interment of the ancestral remains. It should be both solemn and celebratory in its impact.

The Interactive Learning Center should engage a broad public audience, and targeting people of school age and older. It should situate the experiences of the EMSW Ancestors within the context of antebellum Richmond, for example, through the display of reproductions of EMSW artifacts and original items on loan from community members. See Appendices A, B and C for sample memorial and interactive learning exhibits.

- 3. VCU establish an annual memorialization event to be observed by all medical students prior to undertaking their first anatomy class.** The purpose of this event would be to pay respect to the EMSW Ancestors and others whose bodies have benefited VCU and the entire field of medicine, voluntarily or otherwise. The event should be planned with input from medical faculty and students and FRC members.
- 4. VCU develop formal guidelines for appropriate university actions, including community engagement, in the event of future discovery of human skeletal remains or material culture.**
- 5. VCU establish an “EMSW Memorialization Steering Committee” to assist with Request for Proposal (RFP) development and the vetting and selection of proposals.** The appropriate memorials for the EMSW Ancestors at the Kontos Building and the interment site should be identified through an RFP process. Artists and architects from around the world should be invited to compete for the honor of creating these important monuments. VCU should administer the RFP process, emphasizing the importance of prior experience in memorializing African diasporic life and enslavement, and provide institutional support necessary for securing the funding for selected proposals. The Steering Committee should include FRC representation.
- 6. VCU initiate a formal study of: (1) the legacy of slavery within the history of the university and (2) mechanisms for redressing this legacy.** VCU should follow the examples of other Universities Studying Slavery Consortium (USS) members and undertake a systematic investigation of its historic relationship to slavery. Tangible evidence from the EMSW Project may serve as the basis for this study, which should extend to the institution’s beginnings as MDHSC. A task force, working group, or some other formal body should lead the study. The final report should include, or serve as the basis for, recommendations for redressing the institutional legacy of slavery.

It is expected that memorialization will occur in phases. Physical memorialization efforts will entail at least two stages, commencing at the VCU-owned Kontos Building and continuing with construction at the

interment site. Should VCU undertake the recommended formal study of its relationship to the institution of slavery, related activities might overlap with but extend beyond the EMSW Project.

## **Interment Recommendations**

### **The Family Representative Council recommends:**

- 1. Interment of all EMSW Ancestral Remains and associated artifacts underground at the African Burial Ground located in the City of Richmond.** Located near the intersection of 15<sup>th</sup> and East Broad Streets and Interstate 95, the African Burial Ground is perhaps the earliest site designated for burial of enslaved and free Africans in Richmond. The burial ground was active from the mid-18<sup>th</sup> into the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is understood that the Ancestral Remains may not have come from the African Burial Ground. Indeed, given the circumstances of graverobbing (and perhaps worse) by which their bodies were procured for medical training, identifying initial burial places may prove an impossible task. This recommendation reflects the African Burial Ground's tremendous historical and contemporary significance to the city's African American community. Proper memorialization and interment of the EMSW Ancestors at this site will help to increase public awareness of the African Burial Ground as the sacred final resting place for those whose labor built Richmond. A photograph of the burial ground is included in this report as Appendix D.

An alternative burial location is Evergreen Cemetery located on the Richmond/Henrico County line. Evergreen Cemetery has a notable history dating to 1891. Buried there are 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 Cemetery is also considered unfeasible for interment, VCU should consult with the FRC and site location and development experts in order to determine an appropriate alternative. Necessary procurement and funding for purchase and maintenance of such property would be led by VCU, to secure collaboration, coordination, and support through corporate, religious, private, and community organization contributions and sponsorships.

- 2. An Interment Ceremony designed by funerary experts in western African burial traditions in consultation with the FRC.** The EMSW Ancestors mostly are Africans and their descendants who arrived in antebellum Richmond when the city served as a notorious commercial center for trans-Atlantic slavery. As such, they would have brought with them and continued rich cultural traditions representing a range of African ethnicities. The observation of historically appropriate West African burial customs, as identified by project researchers, will be important features for this long overdue interment ceremony.
- 3. Coffin boxes designed and crafted by West African artisans for burial of the Ancestral Remains and related artifacts.** No outer burial container shall be used when interring the remains. See Appendix E for examples of coffin boxes used in the New York African Burial Ground interment ceremony.
- 4. VCU establish an "EMSW Interment Steering Committee" to assist with Request for Proposal (RFP) development and the vetting and selection of proposals.** Experts selected to

plan the Interment Ceremony and to design the coffins should be identified through an RFP process in order to cast a broad net for diverse, innovative, and authentic expertise. This group should include local and national talent and should be ethnically diverse, particularly consisting of African and African American expertise. The ceremony should be intentionally inclusive and 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. VCU should administer the RFP process and provide institutional support necessary for securing the funding for selected proposals. The Steering Committee should include FRC representation.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

There is no path to a better future that does not go through the troubled past. This fact has only become more obvious in the time since we presented our draft recommendations. For the past few years, the nation has been consumed with “race talk.” Current public dialogue addresses issues such as police shootings, immigration, Confederate monuments, and resurgent white supremacist violence. The headlines, by now, are familiar and the issues certainly are not new. Many of them are central to American history and daily life.

But it seems as though we have arrived at another historic crossroads. Nationally and locally, we are deciding, once again, who we are and what we will become. Serious attempts to address these questions begin by considering how we got here; and how we shape the present and future, in part, through our meanings and memorialization of the past. Nowhere is the need to answer these questions greater than in cities like Richmond that are torn between Confederate and Jim Crow heritage and “New South” aspirations. Contested history is serious business. Those needing a reminder of this point received one through last year’s white nationalist rally in Charlottesville.

We have offered recommendations for dealing with troubling aspects of VCU’s institutional history. As prominent sites of education and collective memory, universities are important to the process of reckoning with difficult history (Swarns, 2016; Wilson, 2017). Increasingly, universities are socially and economically powerful institutions whose reach and responsibilities extend beyond the classroom or campus. As such, they are uniquely positioned to exhibit leadership through the nature of their responses to social matters. VCU has acknowledged and accepted this responsibility and may well provide a model of public engagement for other institutions of higher learning.

Throughout this document, we have used the terms *justice* and *accountability*. We have done so in order to frame our approach to the issues at stake and to signal our commitment to the broader descendant community. Moreover, we are aware that this history is part of a larger story of Richmond’s contested public spaces. This story is still being written (and rewritten) and, for many, African American dignity and respect remain its central themes. Here, it is worth noting the project’s inclusiveness of those who have led struggles to reclaim lost and hidden histories, even when those struggles involved VCU. Such clarity of purpose and institutional humility is necessary but rare and sets the EMSW Project apart from similar projects (see Walters, 2017).

Lastly, there is more to do. It is our belief that the recommendations in this report will help to move the VCU and broader communities in a direction that will prove rewarding for the generations to come. As indicated in previous sections, we anticipate a role in the implementation phase of the project. Also, we are now in the process of renaming the project (as suggested by community members). The new name should reflect the Ancestors’ cultural identities and their symbolic significance for the VCU and broader communities.

It has been an honor to serve our Ancestors and to represent the descendant community. We have strived to reward their trust.

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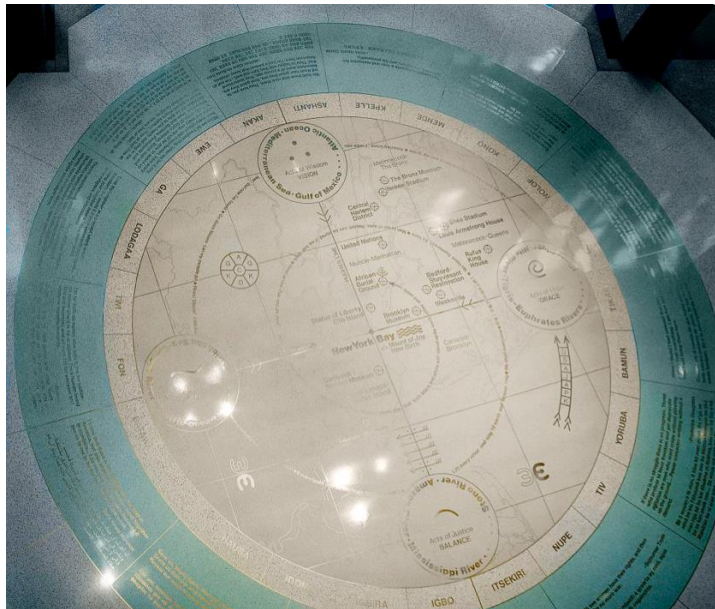
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## APPENDIX A: Sample Interior Memorial Artwork



New York African Burial Ground: “New Ring Shout”



New York African Burial Ground: “Unearthed” (Based on facial reconstructions)



## APPENDIX B: Sample Outdoor Memorials



Brown University

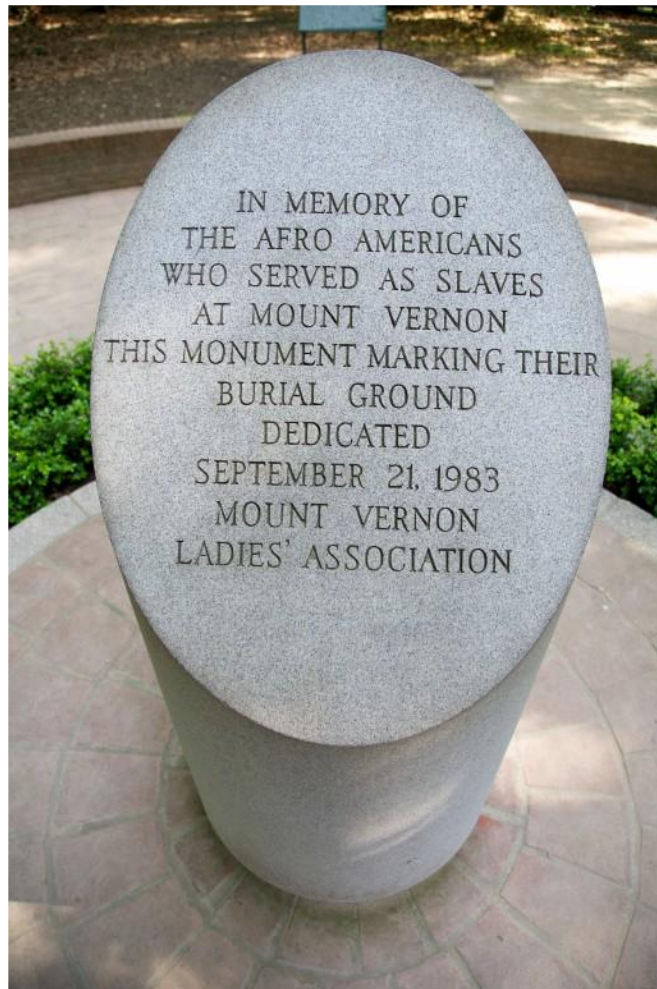


University of Virginia (artist rendering of Memorial to Enslaved Laborers)

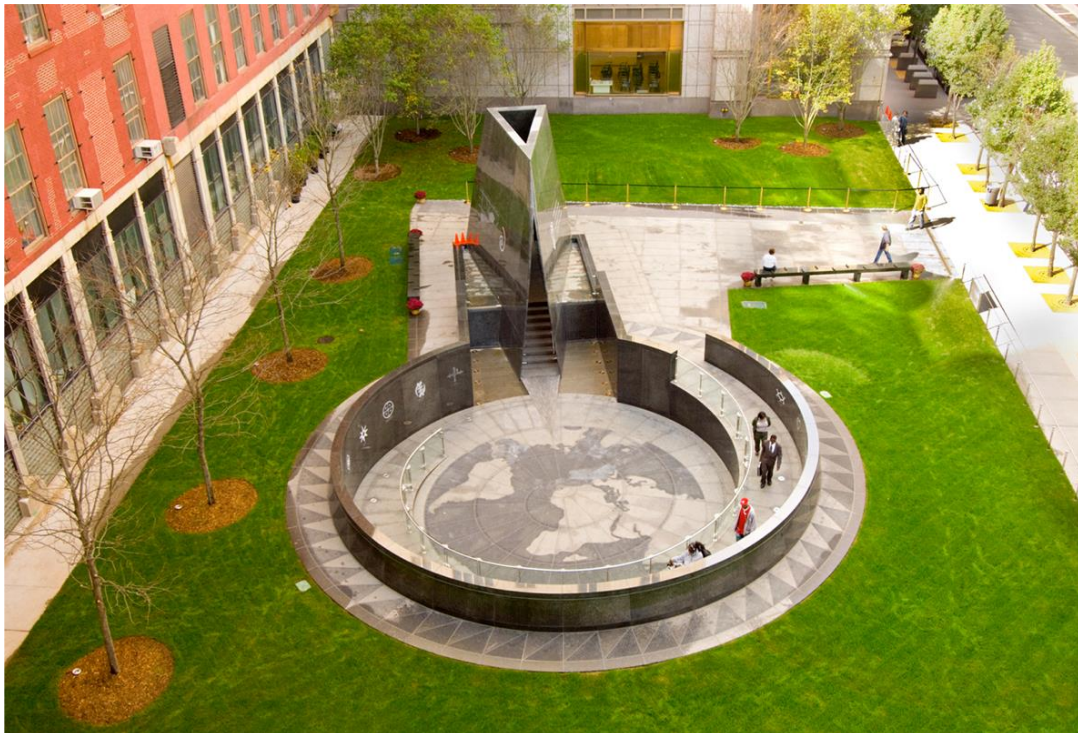


University of North Carolina (“Unsung Founders”)





Mount Vernon Slave Cemetery



African Burial Ground National Monument: “Door of Return”





Portsmouth, NH African Burying Ground

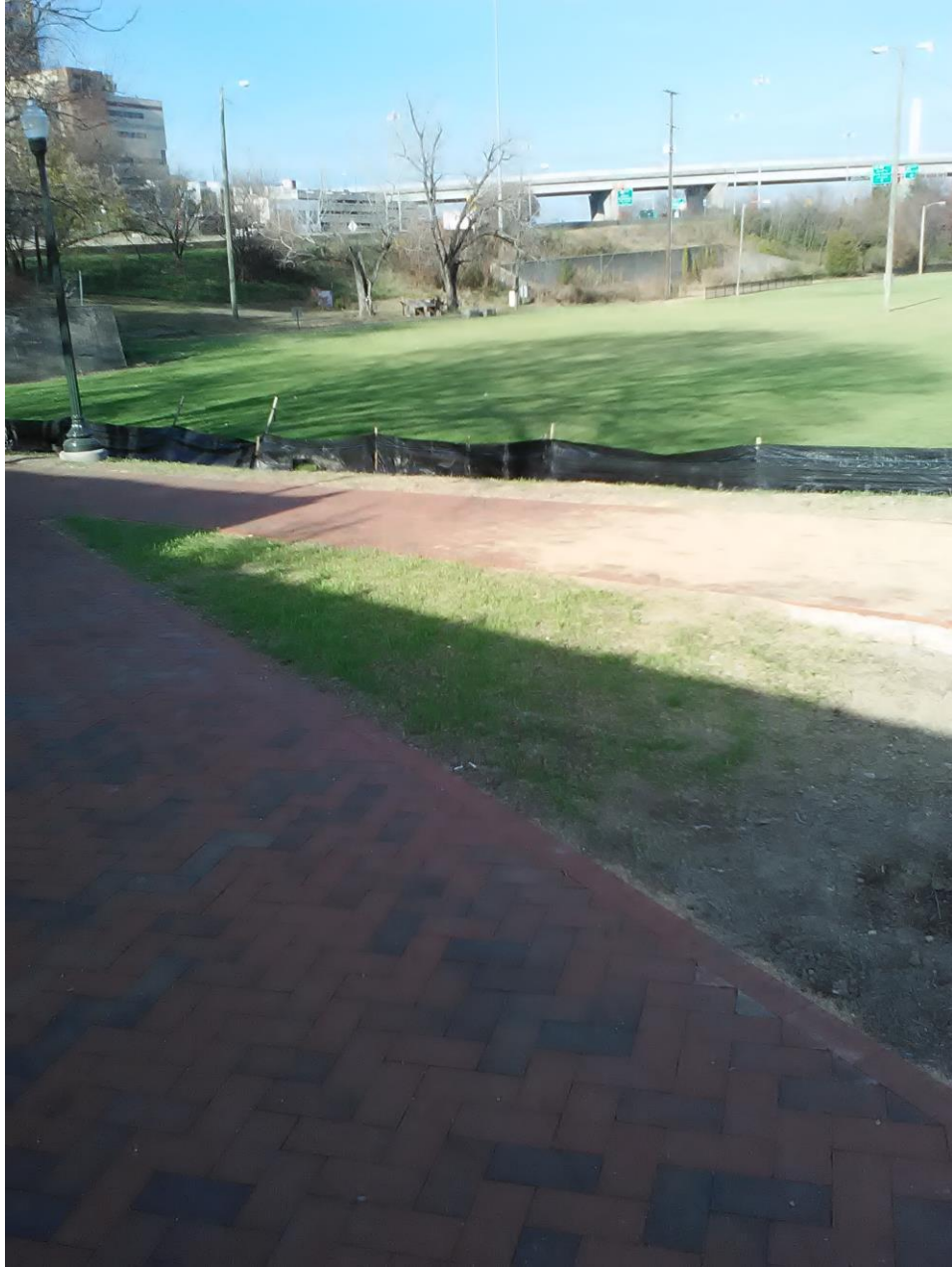
## APPENDIX C: Sample Interactive Learning Exhibits



New York African Burial Ground



**APPENDIX D: Proposed Interment Site**



Richmond African Burial Ground

## APPENDIX E: Sample Coffin Box



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