History of the East Marshall Street Well

Kontos Building Wall Panels
In October of 1844, the faculty of the Medical Department of Hampton Institute College, precursor of the Virginia Commonwealth University’s School of Medicine, began the eighth term of lectures in its new home on Academy Square. In an effort to maintain the high standards of medical education set by the East Marshall Street Well, the medical faculty faced the challenge of procuring cadavers to build the Hermes A. Kontos Medical Sciences Building, the former segregated facility for Richmond’s African American community. The school had already procured cadavers for students through the nearby Egyptian Building. When the cadavers were no longer useful for educational purposes, they were respectfully discarded as refuse.

The learning environment of the early 19th century was marked by a global expansion of medical knowledge. The school was one of the few in the United States to provide medical education to women. To meet the demands of this rapid growth, the school expanded its resources and established a licensing program for medical professionals. This expansion required the school to maintain a steady supply of cadavers to support its educational mission.

In April of 1994, construction workers discovered a well containing human skeletal remains 25 feet below East Marshall Street. The historical site had been the location of the St. Philip’s East Hospital, the former segregated facility for African American patients. The well was discovered during construction and was quickly covered up. The well was later excavated, and the remains were carefully removed and transported to VCU’s Archaeological Research Center for analysis.

In 1995, the anatomists identified the remains of 53 individuals, including nine children primarily of African American descent. Doug Owsley and Kari Bruwelheide, the VCU and Richmond communities learned about the discovery of the East Marshall Street Well. The Smithsonian Institution, lacking funding from VCU, undertook the excavation of the well and the surrounding area.

Two decades later, interest in the remains re-emerged. In 2011, Doug Owsley and Kari Bruwelheide, the VCU and Richmond communities learned about the discovery of the East Marshall Street Well. The Smithsonian Institution, lacking funding from VCU, undertook the excavation of the well and the surrounding area.

VCU President Michael Rao established an East Marshall Street Well Planning Committee composed of community and university representatives in 2010 to begin the path to reconciliation. With the assistance of Justice and Sustainability Associates of Washington, D.C., the planning committee held a series of community meetings and discussions where VCU and the Richmond community engaged in dialogue and shared what had been learned through forensic analysis. The planning committee worked with the descendants of the unnamed individuals from the East Marshall Street Well to recommend actions that VCU should take.

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