In the Spirit of Gabriel & Nan, Nat Turner, Solomon Northup, Madison Washington, John Brown, Mary Jane Richards, Elizabeth Van Lew, John Mitchell Jr., Barbara Johns, Oliver Hill & all who struggle for Justice.

The Virginia DEFENDER

FREE

A statewide quarterly newspaper published by the Virginia Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality

Founded in 2005 - Now serving 16 Virginia cities and counties

Vol. 22, No. 2, Issue 79 | 15,000 copies | Online at virginiadefender.org | Autumn 2026

More questions about Richmond's 'Shockoe Project'

By Phil Wilayto

We're hearing a lot of concerns about Richmond's 'Shockoe Project,' the multi-million-dollar, 10-acre memorial park designed to educate the public about the history of what was once the epicenter of the U.S. domestic slave trade.

We're hearing that money is being moved. Contracts are being cancelled or 'paused.' And stewardship of the project is being turned over to a shadowy entity run by some of the same people who previously promoted putttig a baseball stadium on this sacred ground.

What's going on?

In 2020, during the tumultuous Black Lives Matter protests in Richmond, the City government, in the person of then-Mayor Levar Stoney, finally committed to creating a memorial park in Shockoe Bottom, the downtown area that for 30 years before the Civil War was the epicenter of the U.S. domestic slave trade.

The idea for the park came out of a months-long series of public meetings organized in 2015 by the Defenders' Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project. That plan called for a nine-acre park, large enough to prevent any more attempts at inappropriate development in the Bottom, like the baseball stadium promoted by former Richmond Mayor Dwight Jones.

On July 28, 2020, Mayor Stoney held a press conference at which he announced the city would create a memorial park in Shockoe Bottom. Among the invited speakers was Sacred Ground Project Chair Ana Edwards.

The city's plan, as described on its website, states that the memorial park is to include "the Shockoe Institute, National Slavery Museum, Lumpkin's Slave Jail, Mary Lumpkin Event Lawn, the African Burial Ground, National Memorial, as well as the Winfree Cottage, the Shockoe Hill African Burying Ground and the Trail of the Enslaved."

Money was appropriated, the Baskervill



architecture firm was hired to lead what was called the Shockoe Project and subcontracts were awarded.

It looked like the community finally had won.

Now we're not so sure.

It's been six years since thousands of people took to the streets in Richmond, protesting the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, the fatal police shooting of Marcus David-Peters in Richmond, the five Confederate statues on Monument Avenue and the city government's refusal to agree to create a Shockoe Bottom Memorial Park.

The mass pressure on the city government to properly memorialize Shockoe Bottom, built up by decades of sustained, determined community struggle by many organizations and individuals and intensified by the BLM protests, has subsided.

Add to that the fact that the local, overwhelmingly white business elite has never supported telling the real story of Richmond's leading role in the U.S. slave trade - as well as a white-supremacist White House hell-bent on preventing any honest telling of the real origin story of the United States, and you have a perfect storm working against creating a truly appropriate memorial to the hundreds of thousands of women, men and children sold out of Shockoe Bottom to the forced labor camps of the Deep South.

We're not saying there won't be a memorial park. We're confident there will be one and that it will include the elements listed above.

But much of the project seems to have been "paused," and there are serious questions as to whether the City is still committed to the original plan, who will lead this effort and if it will actually benefit the descendant community - Black people who today are still dealing with the effects of the historic oppression and exploitation of their ancestors.

In this issue of the Defender we examine three things: the money, the contracts and the leadership. We do this by comparing information we have received from the city government with information we have gathered from other sources.

Let us begin.

See SHOCKOE on page 2

reclaiming our sacred ground

Questions for the Shockoe Project: Size, money, contracts & 'stewardship'

Staff report

As part of the Defender's ongoing effort to keep the community informed about what is happening with Shockoe Bottom, we submitted a list of questions to the city government concerning funding, contracts and stewardship. We received responses from city spokesperson Michael A. Hinkle.

These are our questions, with the answers, followed by our comments.

How much money did the City originally allocate for the Shockoe Project?

As of FY2026, $63 million has been allocated for the Shockoe Project

How much of this money has been spent to date?

$12.3 million has been spent (does not include obligated funds)

(Note: "Obligated funds" means money that has been legally contracted, but not yet paid.)

Who is responsible for the oversight of the funds?

All funds are currently managed by the City of Richmond.

How many contractors or subcontractors have received contracts connected to the Shockoe Project?

7 contractors have received contracts connected to the Shockoe Project.

Which of these contracts have been cancelled?

None of these contracts have been cancelled.

Which of these contracts have been put on hold?

Some of the projects are on hold until funding permits next steps (i.e. design has been completed, but construction cannot yet start), but no one specific contractor is on hold.

What role does the Shockoe Legacy Foundation (formerly the National Slavery Museum Foundation) play in the use or control of city funds for The Shockoe Project?

The Shockoe Legacy Foundation (SLF) is a key strategic partner in advancing the implementation of the Shockoe Project and supporting the broader vision for the site. SLF has been a steadfast advocate for the project's vision and for establishing Shockoe as one of the nation's most significaant sites associated with the history and legacy of the domestic slave trade.

While the City of Richmond will retain fiduciary oversight and control of City appropriated funds and public resources, SLF will serve as an important advisor, partner, and stakeholder in the continued development and implementation of the project. The Foundation's engagement will include supporting strategic planning, stakeholder coordination, fundraising, and advocacy efforts that advance the overall vision for Shockoe.

In addition, SLF is expected to undertake significant private fundraising efforts to support the completion of various components of the Shockoe Project. These philanthropic efforts are intended to complement, rather than replace, the City's public investment and will help leverage additional resources necessary to realize the full vision for Shockoe.

Does the City envision turning over responsibility for the Shockoe Project to the Shockoe Legacy Foundation in a similar way that it turned over responsibility for Monroe Park to a private foundation?

The City of Richmond views the Shockoe Legacy Foundation (SLF) as a critical and long-term partner in realizing the vision of the Shockoe Project campus. The success of the campus will require a sustained partnership between the City and SLF, with both organizations working collaboratively to advance the project's vision, support its continued development, and ensure that Shockoe remains a nationally significant destination for history, education, cultural engagement, and tourism.

While the City will maintain its responsibilities for public assets, City-owned property, public funding, and applicable governmental functions, SLF will provide an important complementary role through advocacy, fundraising, partnership development, programming support, and long-term stewardship activities.

Ultimately, the City's partnership with SLF is intended to ensure that the substantial public and private investments being made in Shockoe result in a campus that is not only successfully completed, but also responsibly managed, maintained, programmed, and sustained for generations to come. The shared goal is to establish Shockoe as a nationally and internationally recognized destination that honors its history, advances education and reconciliation, supports cultural and economic activity, and serves as a lasting public asset for the City of Richmond and the broader community.

Is the City still committed to creating a 10-acre Shockoe Bottom memorial park?

Yes. It is worth [noting] in background that the term "10-acres" is a misnomer as the site does not add up to ten acres. This was a name applied to the site to give is (sic) a strategic identity.

If so, what is the timeline for the project's development and completion?

The overall Shockoe Project is envisioned as a comprehensive Master Plan that will be implemented in multiple phases based on the availability of funding, project readiness, and identified priorities. The Shockoe Institute has been completed, and the Slave Trailhead is nearing completion. In addition, the City is advancing the development of construction plans for the Lumpkin's Slave Jail Pavilion.

Moving forward, the City and the Shockoe Legacy Foundation (SLF) will continue to assess available public and private resources, project needs, and implementation priorities. Projects will be advanced strategically as funding becomes available, with consideration given to project readiness, historical significance, community impact, and the overall objectives of the Master Plan. This phased approach will allow the City and SLF to maintain flexibility while ensuring that individual investments contribute

See **QUESTIONS** on page 14

Do you want to fight for Freedom, Justice & Equality? JOIN THE DEFENDERS!

VIRGINIA DEFENDERS

for Freedom, Justice & Equality

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sacredgroundproject.net
odessasolidaritycampaign.net

The Virginia Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality is an all-volunteer organization of Virginians working for the survival of our communities through education and social justice projects.

We started out in June 2002. Many of us had relatives in the Richmond City Jail or state prisons and were concerned about the physical conditions of these institutions.

As we worked around these issues, we learned more and more about the connections between jails, jobs, poverty, racism, sexism, LGBTQ+ oppression, class, war and political representation. We began to organize around these issues as well.

We now sponsor The Virginia Defender quarterly newspaper; Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project; the Prisoner Solidarity, Immigrant Support, Labor Support and Antiwar committees; Odessa Solidarity Campaign; and are affiliated with the Virginia Prison Justice Network, which we co-founded.

If you agree with the principles below and want to work to make these ideals a reality, we invite you to join us. Together, we can make a real difference in the life of our communities.

WHAT WE BELIEVE

We believe in Freedom

We believe that all people must be free to develop to their full potential as human beings. We must be free from hunger, from preventable diseases, from homelessness, from ignorance. We must be free to work and to provide for ourselves and our families. We must be free to pursue our education and to develop ourselves culturally and spiritually. We must be free from fear of the arbitrary use of police power and from the physical and cultural attacks of white-supremacist organizations. Women and the LGBTQ+ community must be free from physical, cultural and emotional oppression. Children must be free from dangers like lead poisoning, asthma and sexual exploitation. Our youths must be free both from police harassment and the mindless violence of the streets. We must all be free from unjust wars fought in the interest of the wealthy few at the expense of the struggling many.

We believe in Justice

We believe that every human being has the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. And we believe that these rights are meaningless unless we also have the right to a job at a living wage, to decent housing, to adequate health care, to a meaningful education. We believe that all people have the right to stand equally before the law, to equal and fair treatment by the police, by the court system and in jails and prisons. And we believe that the death penalty is the ultimate exercise in injustice.

We believe in Equality

We live in the richest country in the world. But it's a country that owes its tremendous wealth to the barbaric oppression of Black labor on a historic scale, the theft of Indigenous and Mexican lands, the cruel exploitation of Asian labor and the labor of waves of poor European immigrants.

This country does not belong to the wealthy few who have claimed it for their own. As human beings, we all have an equal right to its resources. As descendants of those whose blood, sweat and tears paid cruelly for its development, we have a right to collective reparations. As people who struggle every day with ongoing inequality, we have the right to affirmative action. And all oppressed peoples have the right to self-determination.

We believe that for any one of us to be free, we must all be free. We believe that for any one of us to have justice, we must all have justice. We believe that equality for anyone is impossible without equality for everyone

As Defenders, we pledge ourselves to defend our community, its men, its women and especially its children, from all forms of oppression. We pledge to fight for a world where all people can live in dignity, freedom and peace.

community news

news u can use

Free 24/7 advice from a nurse

It's 3 a.m., your child wakes up and says they aren't feeling well and you don't know what to do? "CONSULT A NURSE" is a free, 24/7 hotline that provides professional advice on health issues. Call 833-866-6727.

988 for mental health support

Feeling overwhelmed? Maybe even suicidal? Thanks to federal funding, people in need of mental health support can call 988, the number that connects the caller to the National Suicide Prevention Hotline.

Free legal advice

Legal Aid offices across Virginia offer pro bono (free) help for low-income individuals facing civil (noncriminal) legal problems. Call 866-534-5243 to reach your local Legal Aid office and find out if you're eligible.

$35 consultation with an attorney

If you think you have a civil or criminal issue that may require the services of a lawyer, you can call the Virginia Lawyer Referral Service for an up-to-30-minute consultation for a prepaid fee of $35. Statewide, call 800-552-7977. 9 a.m. - 5 p.m., Monday - Friday.

Free food in Richmond

RVA Community Fridges is a mutual aid initiative combating food insecurity in the Richmond area. These are free, community-run refrigerators where anyone can take what they need or leave what they can. No ID required. No appointments. No registration. Just drop by and pick up your free food or drop off a donation. There are currently 17 fridges in the city, each providing 24/7 access to food! For more information, including where to find a fridge near you, log onto: rvacommunityfridges.com



Photo by Sonali Gulati

On the occasion of RIFF's opening night at The Byrd Theater, a group of activists gathered across the street holding signs promoting the RIFF boycott.

RIFF hit with protest, growing call for for boycott

By Danielle DiBlasio

The 15th edition of the Richmond International Film Festival, or RIFF, opened on Sept. 22, but not without pushback.

An Open Letter issued Sept. 14 by the Richmond for Palestine Coalition and endorsed by the Richmond DSA, Richmonders for Peace in Palestine and the Virginia Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality encouraged filmgoers in the Greater Richmond area to boycott the festival.

As reasons to skip the films, the letter cited the sponsorship of the Israeli embassy, a history of including films with harmful rhetoric and festival founder Heather Waters' public denial that Israel is committing genocide in Gaza

In 2023, RIFF was met with major public backlash when the film "No Way Back" was added to the program and screened at The Byrd Theater. The documentary follows several trans people who have chosen to "detransition." but is widely regarded as an anti-trans propaganda piece.

Activists from across Richmond came together to call out the festival for promoting the film, which had already been pulled from screenings at AMC theaters, and asked that Waters have an open dialogue with the community.

Waters refused that opportunity and stood fully by the decision to screen the film, claiming that it presented an alternative viewpoint that many people would agree with.

The festival for many years has screened Israeli films and included the Israeli embassy as a sponsor. In 2024, a full year into Israel's genocidal assault on Palestine, many Richmonders criticized the festival's continued relationship with the Israeli embassy.

Local activists, including prominent trans and housing advocate Penny Page, drafted a statement signed by more than 100 Richmond bands, artists, filmmakers and organizations pledging not to cooperate with the festival.

Because of that campaign, the music component of the festival, called "Flow," has been reduced to a single, three-act event.

That year, when a Palestinian filmmaker whose short film "Blood Like Water" learned of RIFF's relationship with the Israeli embassy and pulled her film, the Virginia Defenders hosted a screening at the Virginia Museum of History & Culture.

In September 2025, Richmond's Style Weekly interviewed Waters and asked her about the backlash the festival had received due to Israeli collaboration.

She responded, "We are not going to punish the artists for what a country's government may or may not be doing. We don't get involved with politics. We support artists and share stories, and I refuse to divest from any country."

The 2026 edition of RIFF included a screening of a film called "UNraveling UNRWA," which portends that UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East) has been completely infiltrated by terrorist activity and is the foremost obstacle to Israeli-Palestinian peace.

The film's director, Duki Dror, remarked, "While UNRWA is understandably bestowed with god-like praise from most Palestinians for its humanitarian work, in parallel, by actively encouraging the Palestinian right of return, UNRWA is prolonging the crisis and undermining the two-state solution it professes to support."

Additionally, this year's festival featured a documentary titled "CasteGate: The Untold Story," which follows a lawsuit against Cisco Systems and its founders, tech entrepreneurs Sundar Iyer and Ramana Kompella. As a result of the advocacy and research of the Dalit civil rights group, Equality Labs, the California Civil Rights Department initiated the lawsuit alleging that Cisco, Iyer and Kompella had engaged in caste-based discrimination against an engineer at the company who was of Dalit (the so-called "Untouchables") caste.

"CasteGate: The Untold Story" contends that the lawsuit against Cisco and its founders created a "moral panic" and false narrative about Hindu Americans. The film's IMDb (Internet Movie Database) page reads "The film features interviews and evidence that reveal hidden hate within progressive rhetoric, the role of media and academia, and the impact of bureaucratic abuse on individuals." This film, in other words, upholds a denial of the very real experience of caste discrimination. In doing so, it also tries to paint the perpetrators of such abuse as the actual victims.

On the occasion of RIFF's opening night on Sept. 22, a red carpet event was held at The Byrd Theater before showing the locally made film "The Cashier." A group of activists gathered across the street from the venue, holding signs promoting the RIFF boycott. A photo of the protest appeared the next day on the front page of Richmond's daily newspaper.

Weeks after the festival officially ended, Waters and RIFF announced they would be hosting a special screening on Oct. 16 of a film called "Naza: The Real Story," an Israeli propaganda film made to counter the critically acclaimed film "Naza," in which 24 Israeli soldiers and intelligence officers describe the official policy of coldly calculating the number of "collateral" deaths to be expected from a strike on a suspected Palestinian "militant."

The Richmond for Palestine Coalition called out this screening as further evidence that the festival has devolved into an outlet for right-wing propaganda and that the festival must be boycotted until Waters is no longer at the helm and the festival ceases to screen harmful propaganda.

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community news

17th Annual Richmond Zine Fest a big success

By Harley Salmen

Each year, the Richmond Zine Fest draws large crowds to its annual autumn festival where zinemakers meet, network and display their creations to large, enthusiastic audiences.

This year's gathering - the 17th - took place on Oct. 3 at Studio Two Three, a nonprofit community arts center and workspace in Richmond's Manchester neighborhood.

If you don't already know, zine is short for "magazine." Many people also refer to it as a pamphlet or booklet. Zines are traditionally D.I.Y. and independently published. They have a rich political history that focuses on producing art and spreading information while prioritizing creating over profit.

Zines have always been a medium that centers on having the independence and creative freedom to tell your story. Many marginalized voices have embraced zines as a way to share their stories and expressions in a society that often refuses to acknowledge and share their stories.

The website of the Richmond Zine Fest states that it "... prioritizes the voices and presence of zine makers who are black, POC, LGBTQ, and/or have disabilities."

Zines have been a way to spread political education to large numbers at a low cost. Today they are used as a way to share art, education and more at a time when physical media in general is dwindling.

The Defenders are grateful to have once again been part of this amazing event, sharing our work with the many dedicated and passionate attendees we spoke with.

For more information about Richmond Zine Fest, log onto: richmondzinefest.info

New zines by the Virginia Defenders

Who are Virginia Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality
The Story of Gabriel
The Significance of Shockoe Bottom
Free Jermaine Doss
How to stop the Gun Violence
Songs of Working People
Big Storms:
A Working-Class Prep Guide.



Photo by The Virginia Defender

Cheerfully showing their support for wearing masks are Virginia Defender Editor Phil Wilayto and Sacred Ground Project Chair Ana Edwards.

Mask Bloc RVA helps keep the community safe

By Harley Salmen

COVID-19 cases are on the rise again. Flu season has started. There are over 4,400 cases of measles in the United States right now, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. And there is an Ebola crisis in the Democratic Republic of the Congo that has affected more than 9,400 people, nearly half of whom have died, according to the World Health Organization.

Masking, testing, staying vaccinated and monitoring symptoms are some of the ways we as individuals can help keep our communities and ourselves safe from disease, especially during this time of multiple health crises.

Mask Bloc RVA helps provide the resources to make this possible. Its members offer a range of mask types and sizes to best fit your needs and comfort, as well as other mask supplies and COVID tests for free, and offers drop-off options for the majority of Richmond, as well as parts of Henrico County.

To request supplies, you can visit their Instagram @maskblocrva and click the link in their bio or go to form.jotform.com/260414388135153.

Mask Bloc RVA focuses on distributing masks to reduce the spread of COVID-19, but masking helps protect people from many other infectious diseases, such as the flu, measles, strep throat and many more.

N-95, KN-95 and KF-94 masks are the most effective in preventing the spread of illness. The common blue surgical masks protect the user from large droplets, but due to the loose fit around the face they do not protect the wearer from respiratory germs or contaminants that can be spread through coughs, sneezes, etc.

N-95, KN-95 and KF-94 masks provide a tighter seal and filter finer particles to protect the respiratory system. These masks are reusable for up to 40 hours a week, about 5 days, according to 3M and PPE Supply Canada.

You should dispose of the mask if it's contaminated from others' bodily fluids, being in close contact with an infected person or if it is visibly dirty and/or damaged.

It's important that we take the steps to not only protect ourselves but others in our community, especially vulnerable populations such as disabled people, children and elders.

Masks are one way we can keep our community safe, but they are most helpful when used alongside other methods. such as testing, getting vaccinated, monitoring COVID and other infectious disease trends.

Flu and COVID vaccines are now available at many places, and at select places for free.

Want to keep up with COVID and other infectious disease news and trends? Mask Bloc RVA suggests the Pandemic Mitigation Collaborative (pmc19.com), the People's CDC (peoplescdc.org) and The Sick Times (sicktimes.org).

If you are interested in helping Mask Bloc RVA continue providing this crucial resource to the Richmond community, you can donate via venmo @maskblocrva. Funds are used for supplies that are then distributed to community members.

'THE ANCESTORS AT ENDVIEW NEED US NOW'

Editor's note: The Parkside at Endview Project is a major mixed-use residential and commercial development slated to be built in northern Newport News. This is a private development on land owned by the city. The property was once the site of the Endview Plantation, a tobacco farm worked by enslaved labor, and includes burial sites. The following is an important announcement from the Hampton Roads Community Coalition (HRCC).

A sacred burial; ground at Endview in Newport News is in imminent danger of desecration. Those laid to rest there have no voice in what happens to them next. They are counting on us to be their voice, and the decision is coming before City Council.

We have been here before. At Shockoe Bottom in Richmond, the African Burial Ground was saved only because the people showed up, spoke out and would not be moved. Endview deserves the same, and it deserves it BEFORE the damage is done, not after.

Join the Hampton Roads Community Coalition (HRCC), and Connor DeWall of the Endview project at the Newport News City Council meeting: Tuesday, Oct. 27, 7 p.m., at the City Council Chambers, behind City Hall, at 2400 Washington Ave. in Newport News.

COME EARLY. FILL THE ROOM. SIGN UP TO SPEAK.

Even if you don't speak, your presence tells Council the community is watching.

Brin a friend, your neigjbor, your congregation.

Respect for the dead is not up for debate.

A RARE CORRECTION

We here at The Virginia Defender are very proud of the fact that we have never had to publish a correction of a fact or quote. However, in the Summer 2026 issue we made a mistake that we feel the need to address.

On the front page of the newspaper, above the fold, we ran the headline "What do Venezuela, Iran & Cuba have to do with the AFFORDIBILITY CRISIS?"

Can you catch the error? "Affordability" is actually spelt with an "a," as in "ability," not an "i."

We regret the error and hope that no one has adopted this unfortunately incorrect spelling as their own.

As for the rest of the paper, there were no other mistakes, in terms of facts, quotes or political analysis.



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The Defenders Supporter Program is for friends who want to support our work on an ongoing basis. Make a **monthly pledge** - as little as $1 - or as much as you can afford. Your donation goes directly into the organizing.

HOW TO JOIN

Visit DefendersFJE.blogspot.com or scan the QR code.
Click "Donate" on the right or open the menu (mobile).
Enter the amount you want to donate.
Select "General Support" in the dropdown.
Check the box "Make this a monthly donation".

community news

Community Laundry Program launches in Richmond

Staff Report

A soft launch of the Community Laundry Program is scheduled to take place Saturday, Oct. 24, from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. in the parking lot of Mt. Olivet Church, 1223 N. 25th St.. Richmond.

Organizers say the event will feature eight community partners offering free resources on a first-come, first-served basis. The program, an initiative of We All Matter, was developed to help Richmond residents cover monthly laundry expenses and access vital hygiene supplies.

Attendees are tol have access to free durable clothing from AMJ Closet, textile repairs by Repair Cafe RVA, prepared meals to-go from Mercy Chefs, health screenings (including diabetes and blood pressure checks) from Sanctuary Family Medicine and on-site mental health service referrals from All Family Matters.

The October soft launch is a free event open to the public to promote the first official program event scheduled for Jan. 23, 2027, at the VCU Health Hub, 1330 N. 25th St. For more information: instagram.com/weallmatterinc

Giving Heart Community Feast set for Nov. 24

Staff Report

It's getting close to the time when the Giving Heart hosts its annual Community Thanksgiving Feast that typically draws thousands to share a wonderful community meal.

This year's feast, scheduled for Thursday, Nov. 24, at the Greater Richmond Convention Center, will offer a take-out option in addition to the regular sit-down hot meal.

Doors open at 9:30 a.m., with the meal served from 11 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.

The Greater Richmond Convention Center is located at 403 N. 3rd St in downtown Richmond. The meal is free and free parking will be available at the parking deck at 3rd and Marshall streets.

Giving Heart is a nonprofit organization established in 2005. Its signature outreach opportunities consist of the Annual Community Thanksgiving Day Feast and the Secret Senior Valentine Gift distribution.

Giving Heart depends on volunteers and donations to offer these efforts. For information on how you can help, log onto: thegivingheart.org

no hay fronteras en la lucha de los obreros



Photo by Phil Wilayto

A display of photos of people abducted by ICE agents graces the steps of Richmond City Hall as the Defenders and allies hold an anti-ICE protest on July 24.

Virginians say NO to FLOCK!

Staff report

Activists across Virginia have been demanding that their local governments cancel their contracts with Flock Safety, a mass surveillance company that, among other products, provides law enforcement with License Plate Readers (LPR), which are Solar- and LTE-powered cameras that capture still images of vehicles, noting the license plate, make, model, color and direction of travel.

Cops love the devices, but civil libertarians and immigrant rights supporters say they are disproportionately placed in Black and Brown communities and are used to help hunt down migrants.

In recent weeks, Henrico County has canceled its contract with Flock, citing public concerns. Staunton, Damascus, Harrisonburg and Giles County have also canceled their contracts, while other localities have decided not to renew theirs.

In Richmond, despite an intensive campaign led by Richmond DSA, Mayor Danny Avula has only said that the city would not renew its Flock contract, which is in effect until next June 30.

DeFlock Norfolk, a coalition of local organizations, held a rally Oct. 23 outside City Hall and then attended the City Council meeting to demand the city end its contract with Flock.

SPREAD INFORMATION, NOT PANIC

WHEN REPORTING OR BOOSTING POTENTIAL THREATS, PROVIDE AS MUCH INFORMATION AS POSSIBLE !

REMEMBER! → **S.A.L.U.T.E.**

S IZE
"4-5 law enforcement officers"

A CTIVITY/ACTIONS
"Knocking on someone's door"

L OCATION
"Richmond, at the intersection of W. 27th Street and Perry St."

U NIFORM/CLOTHES
"2 plainclothes officers , 3 wearing vests with ERO on the back, all of them masked"

T IME
"Wednesday, February 11th at 3:32 PM"

E QUIPMENT/WEAPONS
"Ex: weapons, flexicuffs, dogs, door breakers, unmarked cars with federal license plates, etc"

NOT A USEFUL MESSAGE: "ICE SPOTTED IN SOUTHSIDE, RICHMOND!"

PICTURES AND VIDEOS ARE EXTREMELY HELPFUL. PLEASE ADD THESE TO YOUR REPORTS WHEN POSSIBLE! WE KEEP US SAFE!

Richmond Reproductive Freedom Project
Abortion support in VA
rrfp.net 1-888-847-1593

Wesley Memorial United Methodist Church
R. M. HUNTER
Pastor
1720 Mechanicsville Pike
Richmond, VA 23223
Church (804) 644-5830
Residence (804) 329-1375
11 am Sunday Worship
7 pm Wednesday Bible Study





Workers on strike at the Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden pose for a photo at the garden's front entrance. Strikers and their supporters staff the picket line every day from 9.a.m. to 5 p.m. at 1800 Lakeside Ave. in Henrico County. Photo by Phil Wilayto

Striking Lewis Ginter workers hold strong for a living wage

By Phil Wilayto

The workers at the Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden are young, energetic and passionate about caring for and educating the public about the flowers and plants, conservatory and butterfly exhibit and the lakes and trails that grace the 50-acre site in Henrico County.

But since Sept. 2, the workers have been on strike, holding signs outside the garden's main entrance and trying to convince visitors not to cross their picket line and instead support their labor struggle by boycotting the garden.

Way back on Nov. 21, 2024, according to the union, 68% of the workers in the garden's collective bargaining unit - those eligible to be in a union - voted to be represented by the International Association of Machinists & Aerospace Workers, or IAM & AW.

Calling themselves Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden Workers United, they began negotiating with management for a union contract in February 2025.

The negotiations were extensive, but by mid-September 2026, there was tentative agreement to 23 of the union's 25 proposals.

But, along with payroll deduction of union dues, the remaining issue is wages. Management says it can't afford to pay what the workers say they need, and the workers say they can't live on what management is willing to pay.

On Sept. 1, according to the union, 80% of the workers in the bargaining unit voted to go out on strike.

The next day, they hit the bricks.

According to the union, the average wage at Lewis Ginter is $17.54.

According to the MIT Living Wage Calculator for Richmond City, a single adult with no chil+dren in Richmond needs an hourly wage of $23.36 to cover basic needs.

Rather than give up their jobs at the garden, some of the workers have chosen to work part time so they can take on other, better-paying jobs, white still doing the botanical work they love.

On a recent visit to the picket line, the Defender spoke with Bridget Fitzgerald, an organizer with IAM & AW who helped the Lewis Ginter workers with their initial organizing drive.

"Contract negotiations began in February of 2025," Fitzgerald said. "The biggest issue left is wages. We made an opening proposal of a $3.50-an-hour raise for the initial, first-year contract. They made a proposal for 50 cents. We went to $3.00, and they went to 75 cents.

"Then the garden stopped responding with figures, and converted to a percentage. We proposed $2.75, and they said 3%.

"The average wage is $17.54 an hour, so at 3% you're talking about 52 cents."

That conversation took place on Sept. 7. The next day, Fitzgerald texted this reporter.

"After you left, we received a text from a reporter saying that garden management told him they reached out to us and were waiting for a response.

"Our Business Rep Charles Mann, whom you met yesterday, checked his email. The garden responded to our last email indicating they would entertain any proposals from the union. So, with worker approval, Charles sent a proposal for an initial wage increase of $1.90 per hour. This was the garden's response:

"Hi Charles,

"I hope you had a nice holiday weekend. Thank you for conveying the Union's latest counter. I have shared it with the Garden and they do not accept. The Garden's last, best, and final offer is still on the table.

"Given the parties' positions, I'm not sure another meeting would be productive. That said, the Garden is always willing to meet if the Union has anything new to discuss."

As we go to press, that's where things stand.

Meanwhile, LGBG President and CEO Brian Trader seems to be doing pretty well. As a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt, nonprofit organization, the garden has to file what's called a 990 form with the government each year. According to the 990 ending in Fiscal Year 2025, Trader was pulling down an annual salary of $220,183, plus "other" benefits of $16,086, for a total annual compensation package of $236,269.

For a 40-hour week, that works out to $118.13 an hour.

According to ZipRecruiter, the average salary for a nonprofit president in Richmond is $185,022. Salary.com estimates an annual salary for a Richmond nonprofit executive director at $112,457. Indeed puts it at $168,836 for a CEO/president, plus another $50,000 in additional compensation, for a total of $218,836. All totals are lower than Trader's compensation.

Plus, comparing the garden's 990 forms for 2025 and 2024 shows that Trader got a 5.8% raise, for a cool $12,038.

Lewis Ginter has said that paying the higher wages the union is demanding isn't sustainable - but it somehow managed to come up with a good chunk of change to hire a "labor relations" firm - labor organizations call them "union busters" - to advise it how to handle the labor dispute.

According to a U.S. Labor Department Employer Report covering Fiscal Year April 1, 2024, through March 31, 2025, Lewis Ginter contracted in 2024 with the American Labor Group, a national consulting firm based in Charleston, S.C.

According to U.S. Department of Labor Office of Labor-Management Standards Employer Report LM-10, "American Labor Group was engaged to educate employees on labor law and their rights leading up to an election on 11/21/2024."

The form was signed by LGBG President Brian Trader and Chief Financial Officer Steve Parkins.

In 2024, according to the form. Lewis Ginter made three payments to ALG: $10,000 on Oct. 28, $31,335 on Nov. 14 and $38,000 on Dec. 19, three days before the union election, for a total of $79,335.

The American Labor Group was formed in 2015. Its president and co-founder, James Monica, used to work for pro-labor law firms, but then in 2011 moved to Littler Mendelson, an international firm known for its pro-management work in labor and employment law. According to his LinkedIn profile, Monica's duties there included "union avoidance."

The Lewis Ginter struggle has become a cause célèbre in the Richmond area, with supporters joining the picket line at 1800 Lakeside Ave. every day that the garden is open.

And the support isn't just local. Lewis Ginter hosts events like concerts, and several nationally known performers, including Graham Nash of Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young fame and Grammy-nominated Jesse Wells have canceled their gigs at the garden in solidarity with the strike. Several local bands have done the same thing. (See story on page 7.)

People who sympathize with this important struggle are asked to join the striking workers on the picket line any time the garden is open, which is seven days a week from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. at 1800 Lakeside Ave.

Supporters are invited to make a donation to the LGBG Workers United strike fund at: https://www.gofundme.com/f/strike-fund-for-lewis-ginter-botanical-garden-workers

OUR QUESTIONS FOR LEWIS GINTER

Editor's note: In preparing this story, the Defender on Oct. 12 sent LGBG President and CEO Brian Trader the following questions. As of Oct. 28, we had not received a reply.

Is a 3% across-the-board raise the Garden's final offer?

What is the Garden's explanation for not being able to offer a higher raise?

Garden management says it can't afford to pay more than a 3% raise. Is it willing to open its books to the union?

In 2024, Lewis Ginter contracted with the American Labor Group. Has it contracted with ALG or a similar organization in 2025 or 2026?

What is the wage range for the bargaining unit workers?

The Dan Schutt Band says it canceled its scheduled performance at the Garden in solidarity with the striking workers, but that management told the media the event was called off because of weather. Your comment?



Photo by Phil Wilayto

Dan Schutt, left, and Joshua Santamaria, who canceled their gig at Lewis Ginter out of solidarity with the workers, dropped by the picket line to entertain the strikers.

Richmond band says 'NO' to Lewis Ginter

Some upbeat music entertained folks on the Lewis Ginter picket line Sept. 7 when the Richmond-based Dan Schutt Band, (danschuttband.com) showed up to share some solidarity with the labor struggle.

The duo, Dan Schutt and Joshua Santamaria, who describe themselves as "a funky blues-rock band," had been scheduled to play at Louis Ginter, but cancelled the gig.

When asked why, Schutt explained, "Well, we had seen, like, Graham Nash and a lot of other national acts cancel in solidarity and, you know, it's something that we're passionate about, about making sure that, you know, I think if people work full time that they should live above the poverty line and should be able to keep a roof over their heads, and it's something that I feel strongly about. So it just didn't feel right to play the show. We talked to the union organizers and they had told us that a few of the other local bands had canceled, like a week or two before, and [Lewis Ginter] just found another local band to do it.

Lewis Ginter tried to talk about it, and we told them no, and then Lewis Ginter lied and said that they cancelled the gig because of impending weather, which wasn't true. And so that's pretty much the long and short of it."

A Brief history of the Garden

The 50-acre Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden, located at 1800 Lakeside Ave. in Henrico County, was once part of the Oughnum hunting ground of the Powhatan people. The land was later owned by Virginia Gov. Patrick Henry, and then in 1884 purchased by Lewis Ginter (1824-1897), at the time one of the wealthiest businesspeople in Richmond.

Although born in New York City, Ginter had joined the Confederate Army during the Civil War, becoming a major.

When he died, he left a considerable amount of money to his niece, Grace Arents, a philanthropist who used part of the inheritance to develop gardens around her home.

In her will, she left the property to the City of Richmond and eventually it was developed into the present botanical garden, which Arents had stipulated be named after her uncle.

During the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, the Ginter House building owned by Virginia Commonwealth University was renamed because of Ginter's association with the Confederacy.



UFCW Local 400 a VOICE for working America

United Food & Commercial Workers Local 400
www.ufcw400.org

PRESIDENT Mark P. Federici • SECRETARY-TREASURER Christopher Hoffman



Photo by Danielle DiBlasio

Striking teachers, parents and supporters picket outside the Richmond YWCA Sprout School at 5th and East Main streets.

Sprout School daycare teachers strike!

By Danielle DiBlasio

On Monday Oct. 5, teachers at the Richmond YWCA Sprout School at 5th and East Main streets went out on strike.

The school, located inside Second Presbyterian Church, serves children from infants to five-year-olds.

According to the teachers, they had been asking the school's leadership for months for help with understaffing.

After strong calls for change were issued by teachers and by a parent advisory council, the administration finally called a meeting for all teachers, on Friday, Oct. 2 - and announced the closure of all classrooms, with no advance notice that parents would be without childcare.

During this meeting, teachers at the school say the leadership did address their concerns, but that the responses were vague and inadequate.

That's when they made the decision to go on strike.

The following Monday morning, striking teachers rallied outside the school and were joined by families of both enrolled and previously enrolled children.

They held signs and sang songs, calling attention to their basic demands: to bring staffing to student-to-teacher ratios required by law; have a dedicated assistant teacher in every room; and pause enrolling more students until staffing needs are met.

Later that afternoon, Rupa Murthy, CEO of YWCA Richmond, which founded, owns and manages the network of five Sprout Schools in Richmond, sent out an email advising all parents that the school would be closed for an indeterminate period.

Asked why she decided to strike, teacher Janiveya Beasley explained, "We decided to strike instead of quit because we love those kids. Some of us don't just show up for a check, we show up because we actually care about the kids and the work we do.

"Those kids are our families. If anyone knows me, they know I take that serious and quitting would've never solved the problems that speaking out would."

Those participating in the strike have drafted a petition asking for the Richmond community's support in amplifying their demands. The petition can be found on Change.org under the title "Support Sprout School Teachers: Our Children Need Adequate Staffing."

They also started an Instagram account (@2pteachers) where they have shared their demands and anonymous testimony from teachers, former employees and parents.

This has included testimony about issues experienced at other Sprout school locations, indicating that issues are not

See SPROUT on page 15

Ginter Garden worker explains why he's on strike

Aaron Bobb is a Butterfly Educator who has been with the Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden since March of this year. The Defender asked him why he had joined the strike.

"Seeing the amount of work and labor that my co-workers put in and knowing the work I put in and what we get compensated for that, it's a major discrepancy. There are cultural issues that run through the garden that make a kind of a disconnect between the workers and the administrators. We have over 30 board [of directors] members and they've never really come together and had a discussion with us.

"So I'm here because I think myself and all of my co-workers deserve better pay, I think just because you're a nonprofit doesn't mean you can't pay your workers well and a living wage.

"I'm here because there should be more transparency with how the board functions, how the leadership functions and why they're making these decisions.

"I'm here because it sets a precedent for other nonprofits. Historically, from my understanding, nonprofits are not usually unionized and I think that should change.

"I think nonprofits can take advantage of people who are young, ambitious and want to do better for the world, and that's not a reason not to pay well.

"And I think us being out here sets a precedent for other nonprofits, other workplaces like this."



Photo by Brian Palmer/brianpalmer.photos

Defender Joseph Rogers, left, co-chairs the 24th Annual Gabriel Gathering. Speakers included Eryn Boyle and Clare Reines, Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden Workers United; Mwaalkebu-lan Akil, President, American Postal Workers Union Local 199 Retirees Chapter; Rose Bono, Chair, statewide PCAP Committee, United Campus Workers - VCU; and Kayla Mock, Secretary Treasurer, United Food & Commercial Workers Union Local 400.

Labor leaders honor 'Gabriel the Worker' at 24th Gabriel Gathering

Staff report

Oct. 10 marked 226 years since the great slave rebellion leader Gabriel was executed in Richmond for leading a historic attempt to overthrow slavery in Virginia.

And for the 24th year in a row, Gabriel and his struggle were honored by a Gabriel Gathering, sponsored by the Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project of the Virginia Defenders.

Despite a last-minute change of venue because of a forecast of heavy rain, close to 100 people attended the event, held at Gallery at 7 East Main, a new Black-owned art gallery a few blocks from where Gabriel and some of his co-conspirators are now believed to have been executed.

Each year, the event draws on the lessons of the attempted rebellion to shed light on a contemporary issue. This year's theme was "Gabriel the Worker." As a young enslaved blacksmith, Gabriel led a movement that, had it been successful, would not only have ended slavery, but also would have raised the dignity of all working people.

In keeping with this theme, the Oct. 10 event featured representatives from Virginia unions speaking about their current struggles.

The speakers were:

- Mwaalkebu-lan Akil, President, American Postal Workers Union Local 199 Retirees Chapter
- Rose Bono, Chair, statewide PCAP Committee, United Campus Workers - VCU
- Eryn Boyle and Clare Reines, Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden Workers United - currently on strike
- Kayla Mock, Secretary Treasurer, United Food & Commercial Workers Union Local 400

Two teachers at the Richmond YWCA Sprout School, who on Oct. 5 went out on strike over staffing issues. They were represented by Danielle DiBlasio, a member of the Defenders whose daughter formerly attended the school.

The meeting was co-chaired by Ana Edwards, chair of the Sacred Ground Project, and Joseph Rogers, a Defender and Sacred Ground member who is descended from James Apostle Fields, a man born into slavery who went on to become the last Black member of the Virginia legislature before the advent of Jim Crow.

Virginia Defender editor Phil Wilayto gave an update on the ongoing struggle to reclaim and properly memorialize Richmond's Shockoe Bottom, the downtown area that was once the epicenter of the U.S. domestic slave trade. (See the story on page 1.)

Paul Rucker, the art gallery's founder and an accomplished cellist, performed two original pieces inspired by Gabriel's Rebellion.

2026 marks 250 years since Gabriel was born in Henrico County. Participants at the gathering were invited to bring a flower to lay as a tribute to our fallen heroes. The flowers were collected at the meeting and later placed on the Shockoe Bottom African Burial Ground, where the annual gathering is usually held.

This year's Gabriel Gathering was recorded and can be viewed on the Facebook page of the Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project and on Instagram on the account **virginiadefendernews**.

'Gabriel's Uprising': highway marker unveiled

By Phil Wilayto

Drowning out the noise of passing traffic on Richmond's East Broad Street overlooking the Shockoe Bottom African Burial Ground, the crowd cheered as Pam Bingham, a direct descendant of the great slave rebellion leader Gabriel, removed the cover over the new state highway marker titled "Gabriel's Uprising."

As Bingham explained the significance of the event, Ram Bhagat and his Drums No Guns group provided a rhythmic background.

Earlier, Bhagat and Ana Edwards, founder and chair of the Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project of the Virginia Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality, had read the story of Gabriel and his comrades, a struggle that nearly changed the course of U.S. history. They also read the names of all the 25 insurrectionists executed for their roles in the conspiracy.

The unveiling ceremony took place on Sunday, Aug. 30, the 226th anniversary of the day Gabriel and his co-conspirators chose for their rebellion against slavery.

The plan was to walk into the city in small groups, gather at Ancarrow's Landing on the James River and set fire to the warehouses there, drawing militia members away from the capital city, Richmond. Meanwhile, another group would head to the city's armory, where a formerly enslaved man hired to guard the site was expected to hand over the keys.

Then the revolutionaries would regroup and descend on the governor's mansion, seize Gov. James Monroe and hold him hostage until he agreed to end slavery in all of Virginia.



Photo by Danielle McNamara

Pamela Bingham, a direct descendant of Gabriel, unveils the new state historical marker describing "Gabriel's Uprising."

It was a bold plan, involving hundreds if not thousands of enslaved people over 10 counties, along with some antislavery whites, Indigenous people and a few

See MARKER on page 11

Statement by Virginia prisoners to be read at the 24th Annual Gabriel Gathering

Editor's Note: Gabriel was not only an enslaved worker, but also a prisoner - one of the first people to be held at Richmond's notorious Spring Street Penitentiary, which opened in April of 1800, the year of the planned rebellion.

As part of preparing for the 24th Annual Gabriel Gathering, the Defenders asked a group of men held at Greensville, the state's largest prison, for their thoughts on prisoners as workers. This is the statement they submitted.

Intrepid Souls,

Men can't be threatened into winning, they must be led.

Gabriel knew this as he led his rebellion, gathering others in the fight for justice. He knew victory and change were a long way off, potentially beyond his life span. He was right, as we now know.

Today, as we honor the legacy of Gabriel, we must also remember the injustices that we continue to fight today. We've made great strides as a nation towards progress as a champion for justice, but we are not without blemishes, some of which are quite unsettling.

35 cents an hour. That's the going rate for most prison jobs, paid at the rate of 30 hours a week, regardless of true hours worked.

Living among pests and vermin. No blankets or jackets. New meal portions that would starve a child. Don't go back for an extra, that's an institutional theft charge.

We fend for ourselves. We fight for ourselves.

Va kicked us under the rug in the name of safety first? If public safety is the priority, where is the rehabilitation? In a high-ranking officer's words "That's on you!" - as in us, the prisoners.

Where are the programs to help drug addicts get clean? Where are the therapy sessions to help sex offenders? Where is the empathy? Where is the aid to those reentering the community? We the prisoners don't see it, and what help is offered is abysmal at best.

Va is doing everyone a disservice. An unverified statistic, but 70% of the prison population struggle with substance abuse disorder. Why is it then that drugs are so prevalent to the point of being more available here than on the street? Makes one wonder how it gets in.

Rehabilitation isn't a constitutional right. Until it is, watered down slavery is what we face in a system that exploits our value as humans, paying us literal cents that are then spent on commissary that is priced at or above street cost as courts have determined prisoners have no right to consumer protection laws.

In Sum let us not forget the injustices of the past and the fights to correct them as we battle in the present for a better future.

reclaiming our sacred ground

The Significance of Shockoe Bottom

By Ana Edwards & Phil Wilayto

Most people in Richmond know that Virginia was long associated with slavery. Few, however, are aware of the central role the capital city played in that "peculiar institution."

In the early days of the transatlantic slave trade, African men, women and children who survived the horrors of the Middle Passage were brought by ship up the James River, unloaded at Manchester Docks and forced to walk to the slave jails of Shockoe Bottom. This was the origin of the "Richmond Slave Trail," also referred to as the Trail of Enslaved Africans.

Richmond's role in this early trade actually was relatively minor compared to other places, particularly the port city of Charleston, South Carolina. Other cities had their periods as leading entry ports, including Boston and New York City.

But Shockoe Bottom later took on a much larger role. Instead of receiving human cargo from overseas, it functioned increasingly as the place of departure for enslaved Africans being sold from Virginia to plantations in the Deep South.

A sea change in cotton production

One big reason for the change was the Haitian Revolution of 1791-1804. This successful slave insurrection overthrew French colonial rule and established the first Black republic in the "New World."

This frightened the U.S. political establishment to its core. The political leaders were all for slavery, but they were fearful of the growing numbers of Black people in the country relative to the white population. The result was that in 1807 Congress banned the importation of Africans, with the ban taking effect the following year. Virginia itself had banned importation in 1778.

At the same time, three other things were happening:

- The world market for machine-made clothing was expanding, driving up the value of cotton.
- In 1793, Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin, which greatly facilitated the harvesting of the crop.
- And with Napoleon being driven from Haiti, he abandoned his dreams of a New World empire and in 1803 sold the vast territory of Louisiana to the U.S.

So at the same time that the importation of captured Africans became illegal, the demand for enslaved labor in the Deep South had greatly increased as new cotton plantations were established. This led many plantation owners in Virginia and Maryland, where years of cotton growing had exhausted the soil, to realize there was more money to be made in selling human beings than in growing cotton or tobacco.

Richmond emerges as the center

And Richmond increasingly became the center of that trade, centrally located as it was in plantation country with transportation South available with the James River, railroads and the 1,000-mile-long Fall Line Road that ran between Fredericksburg, Va., and Alabama.

And as the demand rose, supply rose to meet it. Virginia became what was known as a "breeder state." Human beings literally were grown as a cash crop. One successful entrepreneur bragged that his plantations had produced 6,000 children for sale. With satisfaction, Thomas Jefferson told George Washington that the birth of Black children was increasing Virginia's capital stock by 4 percent annually.

2nd in size, 1st in significance

And so the great trading center of Richmond came into its own. By the time the Civil War broke out in 1861, the downtown area known as Shockoe Bottom was the largest slave-trading district in the United States north of New Orleans.

However, Shockoe Bottom's true significance was as the epicenter of the domestic slave trade. It was the wholesale district that supplied enslaved people to the many retail districts in the rest of the South.

In the three decades before the end of the Civil War in 1865, between 300,000 and 350,000 people of African descent were sold out of Virginia, most of them passing through the auction houses of Shockoe Bottom.

In the decade from 1830 to 1840 alone, it is estimated that between 10,000 and 11,000 people were sold each year from Richmond and transported by ship, railroad or by foot, fastened together in "coffles," to the sweltering fields of their new owners.

In the process, the district bounded by Main, Marshall, 14th and 19th streets became one of the great wealth-producing areas of the South.

Auction houses, suffering & profits

Shockoe Bottom held some 40-50 auction houses, most of them along 15th Street, known at the time as Wall Street. Other auctions were held in places like the Exchange, St. Charles and City hotels, the Metropolitan and Odd Fellows halls and Bell Tavern, located a block or so west of 15th.

In addition, commodity brokers, who sold anything, including people, had their offices along East Cary Street from west of 15th to about 19th streets. The town whipping post likely stood in what is now the 17th Street Farmers Market.

An enterprise this large required many skills. The heart of the business, of course, was made up of the traders themselves, some of them formal corporations, some freelance individuals. Many of these had their offices and homes north and south of Broad Street between 17th and 18th streets, close to the auction houses.

Slave jails & pens

But enslaved people also had to be held somewhere secure. The largest slave-holding jail, owned by Robert Lumpkin, was located just west and north of the present Main Street Station. Known as the "Devil's Half-Acre," the building housed the origins of Virginia Union University. Silas Omohundro's jail sat at the southeast corner of what is now 17th and East Broad streets. One of William Goodwin's three jails stood at 17th and East Grace streets. Another of his jails for a night held Solomon Northup, author of the book "Twelve Years a Slave" that was the basis for the Oscar-winning movie. Other jails were scattered around the district. Smaller penned-in areas often were attached to the traders' offices.

The African Burial Ground

For those who didn't survive the Middle Passage, or who died from their labors in the city, there was the municipal cemetery just north of what is now East Broad Street between 15th and 16th streets. In 1816, following petitions by free Black residents who objected to poor conditions and its use as a site for executions, the burial ground was closed and became property for development.

In the early 1970s it became a privately owned commercial parking lot used by students and faculty at Virginia Commonwealth University's Medical College of Virginia. In 2008, VCU, a state institution, purchased the parking lot, knowing that it covered a cemetery for enslaved people. After a decade-long community struggle, what is now known as the African Burial Ground was finally reclaimed, although it still has not been properly memorialized.

Virginia's biggest enterprise

Then there were the offices of the many businesses that serviced the slave trade: law firms, insurance companies and the shipping and railroad lines. One of those railroads developed into the present-day CSX Corporation. To help attract the trade of slave dealers, it offered free transportation for children.

There were blacksmith shops and dry goods stores, including the original Thalhimer's one-room establishment. There were clothing houses that made sure the women, men and children waiting to be sold were properly dressed for viewing.

And there were the newspapers. The media wasn't located in Shockoe Bottom itself, but the direct predecessors of today's Richmond Times-Dispatch contributed by announcing the auctions, complete with the number, ages and genders of the "products" to be sold. They also benefited from the trade by publishing advertisements for runaway slaves.

In this period, selling people was the most profitable enterprise in Virginia, and in one way or another most of the city's merchants and professionals found ways to take part. For example, famed attorney Patrick Henry did legal work for Thomas Prosser, who owned Gabriel.

Economic wealth = political power

The trade in slaves and the profits from slave labor built the fortunes that allowed a privileged few to rise to the highest political offices in the country — think Washington and Jefferson, among others — with later generations assuming the political leadership of the Confederacy, the political expression of the rule of the slaveholders and their merchant allies.

Resistance & the Black Nation

But in addition to the suffering and

See SHOCKOE on page 15

sacred ground HISTORICAL RECLAMATION PROJECT

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cops, courts & prisons

Henrico sheriff's office still investigating death of Samiel Malachi

By Phil Wilayto

Nearly seven months after the death of Samiel Malachi, an inmate held at Henrico County Regional Jail West, the county sheriff's office has yet to complete its internal investigation into the circumstances surrounding his death.

"Henrico Police Criminal Investigations Section detectives are providing support to the Sheriff's Office as needed. Further details about the investigation are not available at this time," emailed Lieutenant J. Booker of Internal Affairs in response to an inquiry by the Defender.

Malachi was found unresponsive in his cell at 4:20 a.m. on April 6. The sheriff's office says guards tried to revive him, but arriving paramedics pronounced him dead.

Malachi, 31, was being held on DUI and parole violation charges.

His mother, Gesina Charles, says she spoke to her som the night before he died and said he told her he was afraid for his life because someone was spreading rumors that he was a snitch.

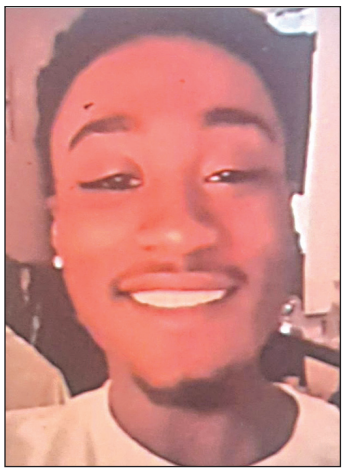


Photo courtesy Gesina Charles

Samiel Malachi

"Mom, they're going to hurt me!" she said he told her.

On June 24, Ms. Charles received the autopsy report from the office of the Virginia Medical Examiner. The conclusion: Malachi had died from a drug overdose. The office said fentanyl, cocaine and xylazine were found in his system.

In its inquiry to the sheriff's office, the Defender asked how Malachi could have obtained enough drugs to cause his death while he was locked in a security facility.

Between 2022 and 2024, seven inmates died in the jail. Lawsuits have been filed alleging that "systemic failures" caused at least some of these deaths.

In 2025, the family of a Hanover man filed a $3 million lawsuit alleging that staff negligence had led to the man's death.

On March 8 of this year, inmate Michael Barrett, 45, died at a hospital after "potentially" harming himself in the jail.

According to WWBT, "The sheriff's office says it has implemented new programs for addiction recovery … and in 2024 was working under a compliance plan to improve safety protocols."

CCPD won't release footage of fatal police shooting of elderly woman

By Phil Wilayto

The Chesterfield County Police Department has not responded to Defender questions concerning a fatal police shooting and the department's policy of not releasing body cam footage when an officer is involved in a fatal shooting.

On Oct. 14, Chesterfield police shot and killed an unidentified woman in her 70s who reportedly was experiencing some kind of mental health crisis.

According to multiple news reports, the woman was said to have left her home earlier that morning in a distraught condition and with a handgun.

Police were called and, after searching for the woman for two hours, two officers reportedly spotted her exiting the woods in Pocahontas State Park.

What happened next is not clear.

"A matter of seconds," Chesterfield Police Chief Edward F. "Frank" Carpenter Jr. said at a press briefing later that day. "The subject emerged from the woodline, a weapon was observed and weapons were discharged at that time."

A woman interviewed by Channel 6 News said she heard five or six gunshots.

The chief said he believed that both officers, who had been trained in crisis intervention, were wearing body cams that were turned on, but that the footage would not be shared with the public.

Two days later, the Defender's editor sent the following email to the Chesterfield County Police Department:

Dear Sir or Ms.,

These are questions about the fatal shooting of a woman by Chesterfield County police officers at Pocahontas State Park on Oct. 14.

A story in the Oct. 15 Richmond Times-Dispatch reported that Police Chief Carpenter stated that "shots were exchanged."

* Did the woman fire first?
* How many shots did she fire?

The story also reported that Chief Carpenter "... said he believes the officers were wearing body cameras. He said the footage will be reviewed, but it will never be released to the public, which he said aligns with the department's policies."

* What is the department's policy on the release of body cam footage of officer-related shootings?

I would appreciate receiving your responses by 5 p.m. Tuesday, Oct. 20.

Thank you,

As of Oct. 28, we have not received a response to our email.

Inthrive Film Festival launches its fourth season

By Harley Salmen

The Inthrive Film Festival finished its Richmond run on Oct. 4, marking the end of its kick-off weekend, but also the beginning of its fourth season.

The festival focuses on films by survivors of incarceration in order to uplift their voices, stories and talents, shift the narrative around surviving incarceration and help remove obstacles to reentry.

The Closing Celebration, held at Studio Two Three, included three films: "Painting Ourselves Into Society," directed by Rashaan Thomas, and "Run It Back!" and "So, Boom!" written by Tiffany Cruz.

Although the kick-off weekend is over, the journey continues. On Oct. 21, the festival will be in Newport News in partnership with Christopher Newport University and Virginia CARES, then back in Richmond for the Virginia Film Festival on Oct. 25 and in Petersburg on Nov. 17-19, partnering with Virginia State University and Richard Bland College.

The festival is actually touring all over the continental United States, through September 2027.

To learn more, visit:
inthrivefilmfestival.org

Answers about Richmond city jail's visitation policy

Staff report

A woman whose son is being held in the Richmond city jail asked us to look into why in-person visits are no longer allowed.

We emailed Sheriff Antionette V. Irving and asked if it's true that in-person visits are no longer allowed, and if so, how long that policy has been in effect, the reason for it and what kinds of communications between inmates and family members is now allowed.

These are the responses we received.

In-person visitation is available to authorized professional visitors such as authorized attorneys, probation and parole officers, social workers, police officers, mental health professionals, and clergy, etc.

Inmate visitation is conducted primarily via video conference using facility issued tablets or by phone.

Special exceptions for personal in-person visits may be granted upon formal request by either the inmate or the inmate's family member, subject to administrative review and approval.

This policy has been in effect since 2019/2020.

Its implementation was driven by technology and communication enhancements which was (sic) concurrently during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

The video visitation significantly increases visitation opportunities for the inmate population, replacing the previous restriction of one 20-minute visit per week. By utilizing digital infrastructure, the facility now accommodates extended and more frequent contact. Additionally, this platform eliminates geographical barriers for non-local families and provides flexible scheduling options to accommodate various work schedules.

This policy remains in effect, and no changes or modifications are anticipated.

Inmate visitation is currently conducted by phone and/or tablet.

Inmates pay the following per minute for phone and/or video visits:

Phone - $0.02 per minute
Tablet Session - $0.03 per minute
Tablet Video - $0.19 per minute

Note: We also contacted the Chesterfield and Henrico county jails, which reported similar policies. Hanover County doesn't operate its own jail, and instead uses the Pamunkey Regional Jail, a private facility located in Hanover County.



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cops, courts & prisons

Racialized abuses of attack dogs persist in remote Va. prisons

By Kevin "Rashid" Johnson

Editor's note: The following is an abridged version of this article. The entire article can be viewed at: virginiadefender.org (Prisoner Essays).

On Dec. 11, 2025, the Virginia Mercury followed up on a July 2022 Business Insider investigation and report on abuses of attack dogs inside U.S. prisons, with an article on continued dog attacks in Virginia prisons and the racist targeting and verbal abuses that attended many of these attacks.

This mistreatment persisted DESPITE the passage of a Va law in 2024 that was supposed to curtail the extreme uses of dogs inside the state's prisons. Despite the new law and this recent media exposure, the abuses still continue, demonstrating that so long as these animals remain inside Va prisons, they will be abused.

The 2024 law was flouted from the outset by Va prison officials. This law limited the uses of attack dogs inside Va prisons to violent situations where there is imminent danger of serious physical injury or death to anyone, or those involving three or more prisoners. The law also required that Va prison officials create publicly available policies governing the uses of dogs.

It should be noted that the "use" of these animals includes their presence and barking, growling and lunging at prisoners for purposes of intimidation. In fact, Rick White, a past warden of Va's notoriously racist and abusive Red Onion State Prison, was quoted in the Business Insider report stating that the "use" of these dogs includes their "presence" or "in other words the implied violence of air growls and bared teeth is sufficient to frighten people into compliance."

In violation of the Va law, these animals are present and "used" throughout Va's remote prisons barking, growling and lunging at prisoners during basic movement where they are going to and from work, school, meals, religious services, etc. I described this practice in a 2025 article, "Reviving Slave Hounds and Canine Crimes In Virginia Prisons." So, these animals are used in defiance of limitations set by the 2024 law.

In further violation of this law, Va officials have never created a publicly available policy setting out the circumstances under which dogs are used in their prisons. Officials did write a policy about dogs that is posted on the Va prison system's website (Operating Procedure 435.3 'Canine Operations Unit'), but the policy deliberately omits stating anything about how and when these animals may be used, which means guards are allowed total discretion to continue misusing them however and whenever they want.

Two recent examples can be given of the persistent and illegal misuse of these dogs, both in their presence and in attacking prisoners. Both examples occurred at Keen Mountain, the Va prison where I am presently confined.

First, on July 26, 2026, an attack dog was brought barking and growling into my own cellblock, in response to two prisoners horse playing. Everyone was ordered by guards, screaming and threatening them with the dog, to lay face down on the floor.

Having witnessed, reported on, and been a victim myself of numerous dog attacks, I sat with my back against a wall, refusing to prostrate myself defenseless with a carnivore trained and used to maul Black prisoners menacing everyone in defiance of the above-mentioned state laws.

During the same weekend, an alleged minor fistfight broke out between two prisoners in another cellblock in Keen Mountain. Responding guards brought in a dog that was again barking and menacing everyone. The animal then lunged at and bit an uninvolved prisoner who had complied with the guards' orders that everyone lay face down on the floor.

What goes unspoken and unexplained is that and why these attack dogs are present ONLY in the Va prison system's remote Western region, where Black and Brown prisoners are disproportionately confined in prisons located in remote segregated white communities. Specifically, at Va's rural, white-staffed prisons Red Onion, Wallens Ridge, River North and Keen Mountain. Dogs are not used in ANY prisons located in Va's Central and Eastern regions which are staffed by largely Blacks and a racially diverse staff.

This is not by accident and it is a blatant continuation of the historic use of attack dogs as weapons of racialized terror by whites against people of color in the Americas. In fact the frequent use of attack dogs to mutilate Blacks during slavery was known to be an "obsession" of Southern whites. …

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Too Much HEAT!

By Jordan Palomares

No, not the police - the summer kind! If winter is any indication for the summer, knowing VA's bipolar weather, we're in for a scorcher!

Climate change spares nobody, especially prisoners, many of whom will bear the brutality of summer with little or no Air Conditioning.

First World problems? Maybe. But according to the UN Declaration of Human Rights and Human Security Council, AC is evermore necessary for survival, especially amid year after year of record-breaking temperatures!

Let's look at VADOC, specifically, Nottoway Correctional Center, VA's reception facility for incoming inmates for local jails. NCC houses regularly roughly 1,400 inmates - with no AC!

Now, everyone can relate to not having AC at one point or another. Maybe a household system broke down. You sweat for a week or two, then the repairman comes and relief arrives.

Now subtract the luxuries of home. You're in a 8' x 10' cell. 2 to a cell. You eat, sleep, and relieve yourself in said room. Your relief? - Assuming you're not in the hole - an 8" desk fan! - No fans allowed in the hole - sweat it out -

Now again, this may be acceptable - and currently under VA code, as NCC is a receiving facility. Inmates are meant to only be held 30-60 days, then shipped to their home facilities. Unfortunately for many, including myself, this isn't the case, as DOC currently has an intake bottleneck of mid-high level inmates housed in reception with nowhere to go. Many are stuck for a year or longer.

To make matters worse, reception inmates cannot even purchase property. - That means no shorts, no lighter clothing, etc. Just heavy state issued denim jumpsuits and cotton underclothes.

With that said - can someone please turn down the heat!?

Quotes from other inmates:

"In the summer I wanted to cry, but I was sweating too much!" - Ace

"Last Summer I thought about sticking my head in the ice machine" - Tyrone

"Hell on Earth, NCC" - James

"I don't go outside in the summer, we have outside inside" - Quan

The Defenders

PRISONER SOLIDARITY COMMITTEE

meets weekly to answer letters from prisoners and type up their reports about conditions inside to publish in this newspaper. We're always looking for folks to help. Interested? Call or text us at 804-644-5834 or email DefendersFJE @hotmail.com

MARKER Continued from page 8

Frenchmen who had fought at Yorktown in the young country's war for independence.

Gabriel, born in or around 1776, grew up with the country's leaders extolling the ideal of freedom. A literate young man - he was just 24, he also likely was influenced by reports of the slave rebellion in the French colony of Haiti,

But on Aug. 30, a terrible storm hit the area, wiping out roads and bridges and forcing Gabriel and his followers to postpone the rebellion by one day - enough time to cause one of the conspirators to panic and reveal the plot to another enslaved man, not involved, who told his owner, who alerted the governor, and the uprising was foiled.

On Oct. 10, 1800, Gabriel and two of his comrades were hanged in Richmond, the last of 25 men executed for their roles in the attempted rebellion.

More than 60 people turned out this Aug. 30 for the marker unveiling that was co-hosted by the Virginia Department of Historic Resources and the Sacred Ground Project..

The new marker replaces an earlier one erected in 2004 on the same site by the DHR as a result of a community campaign led by the Defenders. That marker, unveiled by Haskell Bingham, Pam Bingham's father, included the first physical recognition of the Shockoe Bottom African Burial Ground, which at that time was still covered by a commercial parking lot.

The Defenders and many others will return to the now-reclaimed burial ground at 6 p.m. on Saturday, Oct. 10, for the 24th Annual Gabriel Gathering, which is meant to keep alive the memory of Gabriel's Rebellion and examine how its lessons can be applied to today's many struggles.

The theme for this year's gathering will be "Gabriel the Worker."

For more information, log onto the Sacred Ground Project's website, **sacredgroundproject.net**

TEXT OF THE NEW MARKER

Gabriel's Uprising SA-66

Gabriel, an enslaved blacksmith from Henrico County, attempted to lead a mass uprising against slavery on 30 Aug. 1800. A fierce rainstorm and disclosure of the plot by two enslaved men foiled plans to attack Richmond and capture Gov. James Monroe. Arrested and tried, Gabriel was hanged on 10 Oct. alongside two associates, Isaac and Laddis, at Richmond's "usual place" for executions, likely near present-day S. First St. and the Downtown Expressway. His probable burial place was near there on Cary St. at the Richmond Baptist Church burying ground, no longer visible. Shockoe Bottom, where the city's gallows later stood, was long thought to be the site of Gabriel's execution and burial.

In our opinion

Yes vote, but ...

Nov. 3 will bring the midterm elections, which we're told will be one of the most important we've ever had. The Trump administration is moving headlong to dismantle every element of a bourgeois democracy and in its place is building the structure of an extreme right-wing, white suprenacist dictatorship. If the Democrats take the House of Representatives, as is widely predicted, there could be some brake on this would-be dictator and his Nazi-wannabe lackeys.

According to the polls, most people will be voting Democrat. The Dems may even take the Senate. Trump is doing everything he can to influence the election, from pro-Republican gerrymandering to threats to send federal agents to polling places. And then there's always the possibility of some manufactured crisis that would allow him to declare a National Emergency and call off the elections altogether.

We are truly at a critical point. The problem is, this tension and pressure has created so much fear among folks that they have forgotten some of the recent lessons of how to fight the right wing.

It was only a year ago that talk of a gentle strike was beginning to spread through the population. At first it was small organizations like the Defenders.Then there was the citywide general strike in Minneapolis organized by unions, civic organizations, religious groups and others.

A one-day citywide strike! That got national attention, leading to broader efforts to promote the idea. And major unions like the United Auto Workers were already calling for unions to ally their contract end-dates so they could go out at the end of their contracts without being accused of holding a political strike, which is illegal under the anti-union Taft-Hartley Act.

We don't hear much about a general strike these days. We hear how important it is to vote, which means vote Democrat. We expect most of our readers will do just that.

The danger here is that we forget about the need to build the mass movement, which is the only thing that has ever brought about real change in this country.

The Social Security Act of 1935 was a landmark law that provided a wide range of social benefits, and it came after a wave of citywide general strikes, in San Francisco, Minneapolis and Akron, Ohio.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 came after the mass March on Washington in 1963.

The Black uprisings in more than 100 cities after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. moved the government to create all kinds of anti-poverty programs.

The antiwar movement played a major part in forcing the U.S. to withdraw from Vietnam.

It has always been the mass movements.

There's a reason why the Democratic Party is called "the graveyard of social movements." It gives us just enough hope that electoral change will make a difference that we abandon the broad mass struggle, against racial oppression, sexual oppression, the oppression of the LGBTQ+ community and all mass opposition to predatory, unjust, imperialist wars.

So vote for whomever you're going to vote for on Nov. 3. And in Virginia, vote YES for the three constitutional amendments that would protect abortion rights, same-sex marriage and automatically restore the right to vote to people convicted of a felony but who have "served their time."

But on Nov. 4, rededicate yourself to building the mass movement that can fundamentally challenge both the current reactionary administration and the system that it represents.

And if you're looking for people to link up with, we invite you to contact the Defenders and join us in this fight.

Together, we can do much more than just vote.

Letters to the Editor

Concerns about fairness

Greetings,

As a resident of Virginia who has rebuilt his life and worked to restore his standing in the community, I am deeply concerned about the Department of Justice's upcoming Federal Firearm Rights Restoration (FFRR) program under 18 U.S.C. 925(c).

The first application window on Sept. 25, 2026, is limited to "invited candidates," yet no criteria have been released explaining how these individuals are chosen or why others — many with long records of stability and restored civil rights — must wait. There is also no indication that the invitee list will be made public.

For the Black and Brown Melanated community, this lack of transparency raises serious questions. We have lived through generations of firearm laws applied unevenly and often used to restrict our ability to defend ourselves.

A clear historical example is the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, whose lawful open-carry patrols in Oakland prompted California lawmakers to pass the Mulford Act in 1967 — a bill written specifically to stop Black men from exercising rights long available to white citizens.

From slave codes to Jim Crow permitting systems to modern felon-in-possession laws, the pattern is consistent: when Black people assert their right to self-defense, the law often shifts to limit it.

This history matters today. Any federal program that selectively determines who may regain firearm rights — especially one beginning with an invitation-only list — must be examined for fairness, transparency, and racial impact. Our community has seen what happens when rights are controlled through opaque systems, and we cannot afford to repeat that history under a new federal process.

I hope The Virginia Defender will help bring these concerns into the public conversation.

Peace,

Kwame Binta
RICHMOND

New Afrikan Black Panther Party & Revolutionary Intercommunal Black Panther Party reunite

After several years of informal talks between leading members of both groups, and upon the persistent advice of movement elders including veterans of the original Black Panther Party, the New Afrikan Black Panther Party and the Revolutionary Intercommunal Black Panther Party formally met during Black August 2026 to discuss reuniting our Parties. These groups had formerly split in December 2020.

On September 6, 2026, these meetings ended with a unanimous vote of both groups in favor of merging under the name Revolutionary Intercommunal Black Panther Party (RIBPP). The decision reduced some attending and longtime members to tears of joy.

The reunification of these Panther groups under the RIBPP banner sets a milestone in the history of revolutionary movements. We have proven the truth that correct ideological and political lines determine everything, including the all-round unity and inevitable unification of groups who share them.

The future is bright because we dare to make it so!

Dare to Struggle Dare to Win!
All Power to the People!

Kevin "Rashid" Johnson
Defense Minister, RIBPP



Hundreds turn out Oct.17 for a 50-50-01 rally at Richmond's Monroe Park to promote voting in the Nov. 3 midterm elections and promote the three constitutional amendments that will be on the ballot. Photo by Ana Edwards

ADA: We would like our voices heard too

Thank you for the recent paper.

I am housed at Greensville C.C. currently. One issue I have that a lot here in GCC with ADA [Americans with Disabilities Act) issues can all relate to is discrimination regarding our disability. Most are either vision or hearing impaired.

I have been denied many needed devices and ADA accommodation requests. I have been made fun of by staff and made to feel like I'm a burden due to my disability. I regularly request ADA coordinator do follow D.O.C. operating procedure 801.3. Make rounds every 10 days. As well as following recommendations of specialist of needed items.

When we/I write Richmond ADA dissector they don't respond.

There is no oversight in this and grievances disappear. I would like to bring attention to this.

If this were racial discrimination there would be a lot of eyes on here. It seems since this only affects a handful it is overlooked or not cared about, or taken serious. We would like our voices heard too.

Mark Simons - 1194082
Greensville Correctional Center
JARRATT

The Virginia Defender

A statewide quarterly newspaper published by the
VIRGINIA DEFENDERS FOR FREEDOM, JUSTICE & EQUALITY

Editorial Board: Ana Edwards, Phil Wilayto **Editor:** Phil Wilayto
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Production: Ana Edwards, Phil Wilayto **Tech Support:** Ana Edwards
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Cuba in Perspective: Why we need Cuba & Cuba needs us!

By Tamara Hansen

This summer in mid-August, I had the opportunity of traveling to Havana, Cuba, with a delegation on behalf of Vancouver Communities in Solidarity with Cuba (VCSC) from Canada.

Although I have traveled to Cuba many times, many friends and colleagues were surprised by my plans to visit Cuba at this difficult time. I was asked many questions, "Aren't there power outages daily?" "Isn't there an economic crisis?" and "Why travel now?"

The short answer is that Cuba needs us, the more complex answer is that we need Cuba!

Since January 2026, the U.S. government has been ratcheting up its over 65-year blockade on Cuba. Trump's January 29 Executive Order specifically threatens any country that exports oil to Cuba with punishing tariffs.

Oil is fundamental for transportation, as well as Cuba's electrical grid. When there is no oil, the country cannot move goods and people, there are frequent power outages and this leads to issues with pumping clean water and sanitation.

It is clear the U.S. is strangling the Cuban economy and has been working towards this goal for over 66 years.

In April 1960, Lestor Mallory, an official with the U.S. State Department, wrote a memorandum on Cuba. In it he outlined what continues to be the U.S. government's imperialist agenda towards Cuba for the last 66 years under both Democrat and Republican White Houses – a policy of blockade and sanctions.

Mallory admitted, "The majority of Cubans support Castro (the lowest estimate I have seen is 50 percent)."

He went on to say that the U.S. government needed to create economic "dissatisfaction and hardship" for Cubans and that "hunger" and "desperation" would bring the overthrow of Cuba's revolutionary government.

While the U.S. is not bombing or invading Cuba, the blockade is a genocidal campaign to destroy the people of Cuba and to ruin their way of life and their socialist revolution. This is genocidal because it is stopping Cubans from accessing electricity, gas, water and other essentials for human life in the 21st century.

All of this to say that, yes, traveling to Cuba this summer brought with it challenges: It was not as cheap as before, our flights had to go through a 3rd country, August is the hottest time of year to travel to Cuba with no guarantee of fans or air conditioning and we went prepared for power outages and water scarcity.

On top of all of this, I wondered how we would be perceived by Cubans. There are huge shortages across the island and, while we took material aid and many items to leave behind in Cuba, we knew that as visitors we would be consuming much-needed resources.

But our Cuban friends encouraged us to come, especially as we would be in Havana for the centenary of the birth of Comandante Fidel Castro, leader of the Cuban revolution.



Despite challenges, it was clear that this is an important time to travel to Cuba, to bring material aid and solidarity to Cuba, to show that we are friends in the good and bad times and especially to report back our eyewitness accounts of what we saw in Cuba, in an effort to combat media misinformation.

While in Cuba, we spoke to folks who are dealing with power being out often for 20 hours a day, or sometimes for 40-50 hours in a row. This means no fans while sleeping in the summer heat, more mosquitos, no pumps for running water, along with countless other issues.

However, everywhere we went Cubans were so welcoming and excited to have visitors to share their country with.

We saw children's dance performances, agricultural projects, historic sites, a maternal clinic and so much more. So many of these projects are gains made since the triumph of Cuba's socialist revolution in 1959.

We witnessed their spirit of sharing what they have and offering their best to their guests. It was humbling and inspiring.

Thousands of Cubans and international visitors were with us as we celebrated 100 years since the birth of Comandante Fidel, at the Colloquium in Havana. We had a vigil at our hotel with some of the workers coming to share a few words about what Fidel meant to them.

Throughout our trip, many Cuban friends talked about their firm commitment to continuing with the gains of the Cuban revolution: universal healthcare, universal education and a country where the lives of working people come first, instead of profits and corporate greed.

They know that the U.S. government is attacking working people in the states and has nothing to offer the Cuban people. But that does not make the day-to-day struggle of living under a genocidal blockade easier.

On Oct. 26 and 27, 2026, the United Nations General Assembly will, for the 34th consecutive year, discuss and vote on Cuba's resolution on ending the criminal U.S. blockade.

For 33 years, Cuba has successfully won a vast majority of the world's countries to its side. Due to the vote, Oct. 24-31 has been called as a global week of action against the genocidal blockade on Cuba.

We encourage folks to get involved in local actions and to join the 24-hour global online picket against the U.S. blockade. Find out more at: **us-cubanormalization.org**

***Tamara Hansen** is the coordinator of Vancouver Communities in Solidarity with Cuba (VCSC), author of "Five Decades of the Cuban Revolution: The Challenges of an Unwavering Leadership", member of the Editorial Board of the Fire This Time newspaper, a high school teacher and union member.*

Cannabis Laws, Political Power & Selective Justice

By Kwame Binta

The recent indictment and arrest of Sen. Louise Lucas, a longtime Virginia state senator and one of the Commonwealth's most recognizable political figures, raises questions that extend far beyond one individual case.

While Virginia Sen. Louise Lucas, like every U.S. Citizen, deserves the presumption of innocence until proven guilty in a court of law, her situation invites us to examine a larger pattern that has existed in this country for generations. As someone who personally experienced the weight of cannabis enforcement, I cannot help but notice familiar themes.

Years ago, while serving as President of the UNIA & ACL Division 465 in Richmond, I was convicted on a cannabis-related offense. Like many others, I learned firsthand how cannabis laws can become powerful tools of investigation, prosecution and unjust punishment.

My attorney, David Whaley, once asked me, "Why are they trying to lock you up over 28 grams of cannabis and your legal gun?" That question has stayed with me ever since.

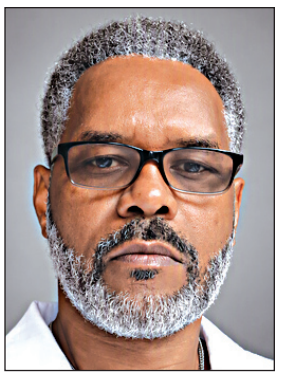
Today, politicians from both parties speak openly about cannabis reform. Billion-dollar cannabis industries operate across the nation. Investors profit. Corporations expand. States collect tax revenue.

Yet for decades, countless individuals, particularly within Black and Brown communities, experienced arrests, convictions, incarceration, financial hardship and damaged reputations because of the very substance that many governments now regulate and tax.

The federal government's case against Sen. Lucas alleges that a cannabis business crossed legal boundaries and that political influence was used improperly. Those allegations will be tested in court. However, the broader question remains: Why does enforcement so often appear uneven?

Many U.S. Citizens have watched large financial institutions, politically connected corporations and powerful interests avoid the level of scrutiny routinely directed toward ordinary citizens. This perception has created a crisis of confidence in equal justice under the law.

For members of the Black and Brown Melanated community, this concern is not theoretical. It is historical. Entire neighborhoods were destabilized by aggressive drug enforcement policies. Families were separated. Economic opportunities were lost. Leadership voices were diminished.



Whether one views the Lucas indictment as justified or politically motivated, it is taking place against the backdrop of a long and complicated history that cannot be ignored.

The issue before us is not whether any particular individual is guilty or innocent. The issue is consistency. If cannabis is now considered a legitimate commercial product in many jurisdictions, then U.S. Citizens deserve a candid conversation about past prosecutions, present enforcement priorities and whether justice is being applied equally regardless of race, status, political affiliation or economic influence.

My own experience taught me that legal systems often affect communities differently depending on who has power and who does not. That is why I believe U.S. Citizens should pay close attention to this case. It may ultimately be about more than one senator. It may force us to confront unresolved questions about cannabis policy, selective enforcement, and the meaning of equal justice under the law.

For decades, the federal government used cannabis laws to justify raids, arrests, prosecutions, asset forfeitures and imprisonment, disproportionately impacting the Black and Brown Melanated community.

Today, as cannabis businesses generate millions of dollars and governments collect tax revenues, many U.S. Citizens are still living with the consequences of convictions that never should have destroyed lives in the first place.

If justice means anything, it must include accountability for past harms, transparency in present prosecutions and equal treatment under the law, regardless of race, wealth, status or political influence. U.S. Citizens deserve nothing less.

The pursuit of justice should never be political. It should never be selective. And it should never depend on who is standing before the court.

***Kwame Binta** is a member of the Black Alliance for Peace and former President, UNIA & ACL Division 465*



Mass protests have erupted across France as workers join striking students in an eruption of anger over austerity, inequality and the goverrment of President Emmanuel Macron. Similar protests have taken place in many other countries.

French student protests spark national anti-government movement

By Leah Forest

After enduring grueling conditions like being forced to stand during classes due to a lack of desks in overcrowded, overheated classrooms, student protests broke out in France starting on Sept. 21.

The protests began at a h igh school in an impoverished suburb with a large immigrant population southeast of Paris. Students voiced feeling abandoned by the Ministry of National Education. Support spread like wildfire, with students in more affluent areas taking to the streets in solidarity, echoing the demands for improved conditions.

The movement united with a teachers strike that had begun on Sept. 17, which also demanded better staffing and conditions.

The leftist General Confederation of Labor (CGT), France's second largest union federation, compared the growing movement to the anti-government protests of May 1968. At that time, mass protests and a general strike nearly brought down the government of President Charles de Gaulle.

"We cannot ask [our youth] to bear all the uncertainties of the world while removing the means to build their future," read one CGT statement.

In response to the current protests, the government has closed 500 schools, to which the movement responded by blockading 500 more, including 90% of the country's universities.

Police violence against the protesters has become another major issue. An estimated 5,000 people, mostly minors, have been arrested. At least 250 have been injured. One officer fired a tear gas canister at close range and knocked out the teeth of a teenager. Another protester lost the use of one of his eyes. One student had his hand blown off by a stun grenade, forcing the government to ban the use of stun grenades by police in crowd control.

The current movement began at Lycée Antoine-de-Saint-Exupéry, a secondary school in the city of Creteil. Students have been enduring overcrowded classes, some even without teachers.

Claire Vigneau, the general secretary of the French Student Union (FSE) spoke to the U.S. news program "Democracy Now."

"It started because class conditions, like studying conditions, are really getting worse and worse. And, like, there is water in their class. They have rats in their class. The roof is falling out."

Prospects beyond the students' current conditions are also bleak, due to the national university placement program, Parcoursup. The criteria for acceptance to the universities is unknown, but the application, which dictates a student's future, appears to favor students from wealthy schools.

Student mobilizations are flooded with cardboard signs that say things like, "Sorry to bother you, we just want a future."

Also, Parcoursup places students far away from their homes, forcing them to move across the country. This creates a pattern where students are uprooted and weighed down by living costs in order to enter a university they didn't choose.

On Sept. 29, the public sector, teachers included, went on strike against the government's budget plan. Opposition to wage freezes, increased tuition fees for foreign students, reduced aid for student housing and war has moved the movement to a higher level.

"Above all, high school students mirror the absurdity of the perspectives we offer them," stated the CGT. "While the consequences of climate change are more palpable every day, the ruling class is making the ostrich and we continue to pollute, as if nothing had happened. While the very designers of AI speak of a major risk to humanity, no serious regulatory initiative is taken. As we witness a genocide in Palestine live, the Israeli government continues to kill with impunity."

Secondary schools aren't the only places impacted. University students, teachers, parents, and working-class people have all been drawn to the streets due to their heinous conditions.

"Everyone is deeply, deeply angry," university student union member Alys Rowlands told "Democracy Now." "We are completely fed up [with] the living conditions, the school conditions, the work conditions that we have."

France will hold its next presidential election on April 18, 2027. According to polls, the leading candidate is Marie LePen of the extreme-right, anti-immigrant National Rally party.

But opposition is alive with this mass movement that started with demands for improved conditions in the high schools and quickly developed into an anti-police brutality, anti-government and anti-racist mass movement.

An oil and energy worker active in the public sector strike was reported as saying that he didn't expect that the presidential election, whatever its outcome, would solve anything.

"[The president] by himself, without the people, will do nothing. Workers will have to keep pushing on him. And how? By striking, demanding real social measures be taken."

As we go to press, students in Albania, Belgium, Greece, Italy and Argentina, inspired by the resistance of the French students, have taken to their own streets as this new movement rages on.

QUESTIONS Cont. from page 2

to the long-term vision and cohesive development of the Shockoe campus.

Is the City planning to hold any more public hearings on the Shockoe Project?

Yes, the City (and its partners, to include SLF) will hold additional public hearings as we reach significant junctures in continued development of the Shockoe Project campus. There is a lot more work to be done and we are eager to involve the public at every step along the way.

OUR COMMENTS

So first of all, the City is no longer saying there will be a 10-acre memorial park: "... the term '10-acres' is a misnomer as the site does not add up to ten acres. This was a name applied to the site to give is (sic) a strategic identity."

Secondly, while it's true that the City has contracted with seven companies, Baskerville, the lead design architectural firm, has hired subcontractors, mainly consultants.

At this point, it seems that most of the city's seven contractors and Baskerville's subcontractors have had their contracts put "on hold."

A question: All these contracts would have been awarded with the understanding that there was $63 million available for the project as a whole. So what happened? Why all of a sudden - and this does seem to have been sudden - are contractors and subcontractors being told their contracts are "on hold"?

Could contracts have been awarded if there wasn't money to pay for them? And if not, then why are the contractors and subcontractors being told to only do design work and not any actual construction?

What's going on here?

Another question: Hinkkle stated that $63 million has been allocated for the Shockoe Project. Then why does the City website's Shockoe Project page say the total amount is only $58 million? ("Project Funding.")

"Allocated funding for The Shockoe Project totals $58 million and includes the recent additional $10.1 million allocated in the City's FY26 Adopted Budget and $13.4 allocation from the Commonwealth of Virginia, General Assembly. The city received an $11,000,000 Mellon Foundation grant to supplement the creation of the Shockoe Institute as part of The Shockoe Project, that grant is included in the aforementioned $58 million."

(https://www.rva.gov/capital-improvement-projects/shockoe-project)

All this brings us back to a point we raised in the last issue of The Virginia Defender (Summer 2026):

"When the Shockoe Project started its work in 2024, $46 million of the $58 million was earmarked for the overall project - the North and South Memorial areas. In March of this year, Baskervill, the lead contracting architectural company, was notified that there was just $18 million available. That's a difference of $28 million, unaccounted for.

"An explanation was requested. To date, the only comment was to the effect that no one ever said that money couldn't be reallocated if something came up. So did 'something' else come up?"

So that's the money and the contracts.

Now for stewardship" - the City's word, not ours.

The City says it is partnering with a new nonprofit called the Shockoe Legacy Foundation. The key person here is state Delegate Delores McQuinn, who previously headed up Richmond City Council's Slave Trail Commission, until that entity dissolved itself, morphing into the National Slavery Museum Foundation, with McQuinn as president.

The SLF organization apparently has no website, no social media presence and no public list of its officers or board members.

A request for information about the SLF emailed to Delegate McQuinn went unanswered.

See QUESTIONS on page 15

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If the SLF is a 501(c)(3) tax exempt nonprofit, it has to file what is called a 990 form, which, among other information, lists its officers.

We were unable to locate a 990 for the SLF. Our thinking is that "Shockoe Legacy Foundation" is just another name for the National Slavery Museum Foundation, which does file a 990.

According to that form, for the fiscal year ending in June 2025, the foundation's principal officers are Delores McQuinn, president; Cynthia Newbille, vice president; and Benjamin Campbell, secretary. The form also lists as treasurer Sylvester Turner, who has recently passed,

The form states that none of the officers or board members are paid.

So the Shockoe Legacy Foundation, which the City expects to provide "long-term stewardship activities," is basically the same people who ran the now-defunct Slave Trail Commission.

That is of some concern.

When former Mayor Dwight Jones announced his plan to put a baseball stadium in Shockoe Bottom - a plan that was defeated after a two-year struggle in which the Defenders played a leading role - the Slave Trail Commission formerly decided not to take a position on that proposal that would have put a commercial ballpark on land where slave jails, slave trader offices and a warehouses that exploited enslaved labor once stool.

And yet, despite that position, unfortunate as it was, the commission's leader stood next to Mayor Jones as he made his announcement and enthusiastically endorsed it.

The commission earlier did not support the ultimately successful community struggle to reclaim the Shockoe Bottom African Burial Ground and later did not support the community campaign to convince the City to accept the community-generated proposal for a Shockoe Bottom Memorial Park.

Despite its faults - which include a lack of transparency, including about how it spent money allocated by city council - the Slave Trail Commission did several things that greatly benefited the city. It initiated the archeological dig that discovered the intact foundation of the slave jail owned by Robert Lumpkin. It installed the Reconciliation Statue at 15th and East Main streets. It improved the Trail of Enslaved Africans.

The people who make up the Shockoe Legacy Foundation have earned the right to be part of the ongoing effort to properly memorialize Shockoe Bottom.

But they have not earned the right to be in charge.

For our part, the Defenders and its Sacred Ground Project will continue to push for transparency, truth telling and financial benefits for the descendant community. Whether we will be successful in those efforts will depend on continued community involvement.

And if the splendid turnouts for the Aug. 30 unveiling of the new "Gabriel's Uprising" state historical marker and the 24th Annual Gabriel Gathering (see page 8) are any indication, that community involvement is already evidemt.

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humiliation that Shockoe Bottom represents, there are the stories of incredible courage: Gabriel's Rebellion in 1800; the 1841 successful mutiny on the slave ship Creole; the self-emancipations of Henry "Box" Brown, Anthony Burns, James Apostle Fields and many others; and the thousands of instances of individual defiance. This tradition of continuous resistance to injustice and brutality is a tribute to the deep resilience of the human spirit.

And there is another reason why present-day Shockoe Bottom is so significant: In many ways, it was the crucible where the present-day African-American community was forged: African, but a people also shaped by its experience in "America."

As stated above, in the 30 years before 1865, around a third of a million people were sold from Virginia, most of them out of Shockoe Bottom. By 1865 there were around 4.5 million Black people in the entire country. That means that, all across the United States, as well as in Canada and Mexico, most people of African descent likely have ancestors who passed through the auction houses and slave jails of Shockoe Bottom.

The slave prison on Goree Island off the coast of Senegal in West Africa is recognized as a sacred place for African-Americans. It is the bit of land where many of their ancestors were held before their final journey from the Motherland. In a similar way, Shockoe Bottom is that bit of land where many of the ancestors were held before their forced journey South to lives of desperate servitude.

This truly is Sacred Ground

This is why Shockoe Bottom has significance far beyond Virginia. There may be no place in the United States that holds more meaning for Black Americans. Just as those of European descent can travel to Ellis Island to see where their ancestors first stepped ashore in the New World, so those of African descent should be able to travel to Richmond to see where their ancestors were forced to leave behind the Old World.

Because of all this, Shockoe Bottom does not belong to Richmonders alone. It belongs to the whole country and especially to all those whose ancestors once stood there, bound and chained, forced to watch while their mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers and even their own children were sold away to lives of torment.

Richmond's Shockoe Bottom has the potential to become an educational center of international significance. Properly preserved, this small area that once held such cold, commercial brutality could become a life-affirming place of study, reflection and meditation.

It can also be a place where the country finally takes up the issue of reparations, the huge debt owed for 246 years of unpaid labor, pain and suffering.

Like the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., it could become a place where people of all backgrounds gather and resolve never again to allow such inhuman cruelty. It could become a place of understanding, of healing, of reconciliation born of a country finally facing the reality of its origins, finally resolving to make right what has been so wrong for so long.

Shockoe Bottom Memorial Park

And yet this is the area where "developers" and their local political allies have made four separate attempts to build a baseball stadium. It's where decaying parking lots cover sacred ground. It's where the City has yet to enact any kind of protective zoning around the African Burial Ground and where its signs simply say "Historic Burial Ground."

After decades of sustained community struggle, Richmond's city government has finally accepted the community proposal for a Shockoe Bottom Memorial Park, to include the African Burial Ground, the Devil's Half-Acre and two blocks east of the CSX railroad tracks where other slave jails, trader offices and supporting businesses once stood. But, having accepted that proposal, the politicians are now trying to exclude the community from the process of creating it.

At this point, we are raising three demands: (1) that there be complete transparency in the process; (2) that the Black community have significant input into decision-making; and that (3) the financial benefits from designing, creating and operating the memorial park primarily go to the descendant community as a whole.

The struggle continues.

Ana Edwards *is Chair of the Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project*

Phil Wilayto *is Editor of The Virginia Defender*

SPROUT Continued from page 7

confined just to the location on strike, but are widespread.

Another common theme of many allegations is that Sprout and YWCA leadership may have tried to cover up rather than resolve instances of abuse and unsafe/unsanitary school conditions.

During the school week that Second Presbyterian Sprout was closed, teachers were told they could be reassigned to other Sprout locations, but it was not made clear if they would be paid during the school's closure.

On Friday, Oct. 9, school administration sent teachers an email telling them to report to school first thing the following Monday morning. Teachers who did return reported teacher-to-student ratios as being back in legal status, but only because many of their students had not returned following the school's closure.

In May of this year, parents at the school formed an advisory council to support teachers struggling with burnout. They asked for a meeting with leadership to address what they saw as inadequate staffing, low teacher morale and the school's hiring and retention plans.

Now they drafted a demand letter and collected endorsements from other parents of both currently and formerly enrolled children and concerned community members. On Oct. 13, they submitted their demand letter to the YWCA's board of directors, but almost immediately received a response that indicated the board would not be taking any of the requested actions.

On Oct. 15, at least two parents of the advisory committee received emails from CEO Murthy alerting them that their child had been disenrolled, effective immediately.

An email from the Parent Advisory Committee sent that afternoon stated, "When we asked for clarifying details [about the disenrollments], our requests were ignored or denied. We do not believe that is a coincidence. We can only conclude that the CEO of the YWCA has retaliated against our families, and ultimately against our two-year-olds, for speaking up on behalf of teachers and other parents."

At the time of this writing, three teachers have maintained their strike and a fourth teacher remains on administrative leave pending an unspecified investigation.

They say the YWCA and Sprout leadership have not made any direct contact with them, nor tried to negotiate. One teacher advised that they had been removed from the school's email and teams accounts, making communication difficult.

The Defender emailed the Sprout School administration asking for its comments to the following questions:

1) The Second Presbyterian location of Sprout was closed for a week because of inadequate staffing. As the school is now open again, are all classrooms open and are all classrooms at legal ratios?

2) Has Sprout and YWCA leadership met with striking teachers to negotiate demands?

3) We were informed that the children of parents who were on the parent advisory council had been disenrolled. Is this true and what is the reasoning behind disenrolling these children?

The following is the response we received from YWCA CEO Rupa Murthy:

"Thank you for reaching out.

"To support the families and children who depend on the YWCA Richmond, we are focused on actively hiring and onboarding the teachers we need to reopen additional classrooms at the Sprout School at Second Presbyterian Church.

"Last week, we reopened three classrooms at this location and are grateful for the extraordinary teachers who show up for our students daily.

"The Sprout School at YWCA Richmond is committed to continuing to deliver high-quality early childhood education to support families of all income levels. Across our Sprout Schools, we work to create environments where children can build relationships, confidence, and curiosity and enter kindergarten ready to learn and succeed."

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