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The Richmond Slave Trail provides valuable lessons on a dark legacy of American history

by: [John Rogers](#)

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RICHMOND, Va. (WRIC) — The city of Richmond carries a legacy tethered to the formation of the United States of America.

Many of our founding fathers spent time in Richmond, but it also played a key role in the Atlantic slave trade. A part of that legacy is still visible today.

Along the banks of the James River, you'll find a well-worn path with a painful past.

The [Richmond Slave Trail](#) is a winding two-and-half mile route from the historic Manchester docks to the old slave auction houses in Shockoe Bottom.

Throughout the 1700s, enslaved people were unloaded from boats along the river and taken along this path – often still in chains — to the auction houses downtown. Then, throughout the 1800s up until the Civil War, some were then loaded back onto boats in Richmond and shipped to be sold in cities across America.

When the slaves were taken along the trail, it was not a pleasant experience.

“Getting them from Point A to Point B. And so, it wasn’t about their comfort...even if it’s going through the woods,” said historian Ana Edwards.

Edwards is with the Sacred Ground Project. She said many of these slaves were moved at night. One of the reasons was so the public could not see the horrors of this practice.

“[These slaves] were not happy people. Were often, you know, crying. People were often angry,” she said.

“Considering the condition that they would have come in off of those boats after months and months and months of having been, you know, in the belly of ships and the nutrition that they would have gotten was extremely minimal. The clothing that they would be wearing would probably be itself very minimal.”

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Edwards says that in the thirty years leading up to the civil war, Richmond had the second-largest slave trading market in the nation — and 300,000 to 350,000 were sold from Virginia.

“Richmond happened to become that particular epicenter for that period. But it means that most people, most Black people who can trace some ancestry back to that period, can trace ancestry back to Virginia.”

As you traverse the long winding path, you’ll encounter Lumpkin’s Jail, also known as the Devil’s Half Acre. It was a property owned by Robert Lumpkin where men, women and children were punished and imprisoned.

“[Lumpkin] was known throughout the region because he would punish enslaved people who tended to run away or that slave holders wanted to have punished for whatever reason, and then would hold them until they could be sold as well. So, he had a reputation.”

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One of the jail’s most famous tenants was Anthony Burns. He was a Virginia slave who had escaped to Boston in 1854 to secure his freedom, but was arrested returned to his Virginia slave owner through the Fugitive Slave Act. Upon his return to Virginia, Burns was imprisoned at Lumpkin’s Jail for four months.

Nearby is the African Burial Ground where many enslaved people lie in unmarked graves. It is also believed to be the spot where a slave named Gabriel was executed, the mastermind behind ‘Gabriel’s Rebellion.’

In 1800, Gabriel was a highly intelligent and literate slave who lived in a plantation in Henrico County. He organized a plan for a widespread slave uprising, one of the largest of its kind in the history of the South.

According to Henrico County historians, the plan was thwarted because of a severe rain storm and because of disclosure by several slaves. Gabriel was executed on October 10th, 1800.

“People can’t process the idea that people like us, human people like us...could actually condone and go along with something that is so plainly wrong and inhumane — and yet they did.”

But the trail offers hope for the future with the Reconciliation Statue. It memorializes the Transatlantic Slave Trade, and there are two identical statues in Liverpool, England, and Benin, Africa.

The Richmond Slave Trail gives you a chance to feel what many of our ancestors – these enslaved people – experienced. Edwards says it’s a lesson we all should never forget.

“This is a place where people can come...begin to know the history. It’s a starting point,” said Edwards.

“You can simply deliver the information, but if you can do it with your feet on the places where this history took place, it resonates more. People accept it better. And then you begin to figure out how you reconcile with it and then how you work with it. Recognize the patterns that we live with today.”