



CITY OF FREDERICKSBURG: PHASE ONE REPORT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

The City of Fredericksburg has contracted with the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience to complete an initiative that consists of three phases. The first phase is an audit of the stories that the community is currently telling about African American History and the slave auction block and how community members feel about those stories. The second phase will focus more specifically on the slave auction block through a series of public brainstorming sessions meant to imagine how the slave auction block may be further interpreted. The final phase will focus on public dialogues that bring the community together to talk about major community themes that have been revealed during the first two phases. As a result of the initiative, the community of Fredericksburg will: more deeply recognize what historical narratives are currently being told and how they affect contemporary discussions in Fredericksburg; reimagine the space (virtual and physical) that surrounds the slave auction block; and, come together to discuss themes that have arisen during the first two phases.

The Phase One Report (below) details major themes extracted from the interviews and focus groups, providing direct (though anonymous) quotes that support the major themes. Additionally, the report details major themes extracted from a review of printed and web-based materials, providing both quantitative and qualitative data to support the major themes. While the report does not provide specific recommendations during this phase, readers may begin to formulate their own thoughts about what future recommendations from the Coalition will be.

INTRODUCTION:

Fredericksburg, located near the Rappahannock River, has a rich history. From its identity as a prominent port during the colonial era to its position between opposing forces during the Civil War, Fredericksburg is known for its historical connections. The legacies of these two eras have significantly shaped the narratives that are told at the battlefield park, downtown visitor center, museums and historic sites, and on historical markers (among other places). Community members feel strongly about their connections to Fredericksburg's history. Specifically, this is true for the slave auction block located on the corner of Charles and William Streets. Last year, the slave auction block was discussed in a number of public and private spaces. A survey was opened to the community in which 602 responses were captured. The general results of the City's survey may be viewed here: <https://www.fredericksburgva.gov/DocumentCenter/View/9304>. As a result, the Fredericksburg City Council voted to keep the slave auction block in its current location by a 6-1 vote and then signed a contract with the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience (the Coalition) to work in collaboration with local elected officials, artists, activists and community members to collectively conceptualize and interpret the slave auction block for contemporary audiences.

The Coalition is a dynamic global network of museums, historic sites and memory initiatives that inspire millions of people each year to explore the parallels between past and present, build bridges of understanding, and take action on pressing social issues. Since its founding in 1999, the Coalition



has grown to include over 250 members in 65 countries, working across regional and thematic networks to facilitate collaboration, exchange and action. The Coalition is the only network of museums and historic sites that connects past and present to foster dialogue and action on critical contemporary issues.

In Phase One of this work, the Coalition conducted an audit to ascertain what narratives (stories), in the context of the slave auction block, the community of Fredericksburg is currently telling. During this phase, Dina Bailey and Braden Paynter of the Coalition reviewed printed and web-based materials and completed on-site focus groups and interviews with community members. The Coalition spoke with over 140 people during two trips to Fredericksburg. The first round of invitations were sent out from a list created by city officials and the Fredericksburg NAACP. The second round of invitations were sent out from names collected from interviewees and focus group participants during the first round of discussions. **The findings from that audit make up this Phase One Report.**

ANALYSIS OF PARTICIPANT PERSPECTIVES:

While City Council decided with a 6-1 vote to keep the slave auction block in its current location, **there is still a significant amount of discussion within the community about the slave auction block remaining or being removed.**

A few quotes from participants:

- “Actually, I thought the issue was resolved after the James Monroe session, but I soon learned otherwise.”
- “I tell people who are upset that the battle may have been lost - the vote - but there is still a war.”
- “I am not fully resolved in my mind about whether it should stay or not. I see compelling reasons for it to stay as an artifact. It is hallowed by the uses it was put to. You wouldn’t see a ‘whites only’ sign, but Auschwitz stands - where does the slave block stand on that spectrum? Maybe it is just too much of an open wound - maybe it is more like the ‘whites only’ sign that you could put in a museum to lessen the trauma that it conveys and still educate. From the standpoint of its safety, I almost wonder if it will need to go to a museum to protect it. It is amazing that it hasn’t really been vandalized. That in itself is interesting. It has endured through all of these eras - it has been a silent witness to tragedy and triumph.”
- “What is the position of the city and how far are they willing to go to listen to the residents who have lived here all of their lives?”



- “I started this history thing when I was a young boy for my grandmother. She was born in 1895 and she hated it [the slave auction block] and was outraged every time she walked by - because her mother had been enslaved.... City Council voted for it to stay ‘for now.’ I am confident that the next generation will demand that it be removed.”
- “But, perhaps there should be a plaque and it should be moved elsewhere. Where it currently stands, it is a time bomb; it’s not a connecting point.”
- “We’ve spent a year talking about this. We’ve talked to hundreds of people. The Council did vote. This has not been an easy deal for anyone...but we are doing the best we can. We have made the choice to leave it there. Now, we need to figure out how to protect it.”
- “That will be part of the process, I think. What we are hearing is the need to show respect and to make the history real and to link it to the full story. Until designers and engineers tell us, I’m not going to say we can’t do something good in that spot. We may not be able to, but we don’t know that yet.”
- “It’s in the middle of the sidewalk. How did people really think that you could tell a huge story in such a small space?”
- “My biggest aspiration would be a better location.”
- “If it would be moved would be my greatest disappointment.”

Many participants are **still grappling specifically with thoughts about the slave auction block’s location.**

A few quotes from participants:

- “It seems out of place to me as a historic relic; you don’t expect to see those types of things there. To just have it there on our sidewalk as we go back and forth as a community shopping and having social interactions.... It just seems out of place.”
- “I think that it’s really important. It’s just kind of random. Almost it’s randomness makes it seem like it’s acceptable in some ways. Like, ‘that’s our history and we’re good with that.’”
- “I looked at the slave auction block every day. It represented a sad part of our history and I thought it was important to be reminded of that. Up until the other day, I was pretty convinced that it needed to stay.... I talked to a black mother who...said when she walks down the street with her children it’s humiliating to her - especially if you just happen upon it. And, I have changed my opinion. I think, perhaps, it should be moved to the museum where it can be presented with more depth.”



- “Why move it? It’s where it was. I would hate to have part of our history obscure and hard to find.”
- “When I was young, we played on the auction block too; I didn’t know what it was and we didn’t have any idea, but played on and around it. The slave block represents part of history like a knot. People and property were auctioned there. It is a part of our history and we need to build on it and understand it. If you destroy the physical space then you lose the memory of it. I want it to be enhanced.”
- “I was always for it staying myself. I always saw it as a place with more reverence. We stop there on Fridays. But, then I thought, what if the Jewish community wanted the camps bulldozed? I think they would have been listened to. What if you felt oppression every day...? I do think about the local NAACP and, after careful thought, that they decided that they wanted it removed. I think that that should have held more weight.”

The majority of participants felt it was **very important to emphasize their generational connections to Fredericksburg**. Contextually, this was sometimes as a point of pride; sometimes as an explanation for feeling strongly (or not) about the slave auction block; and, sometimes to make a point about who should be considered “insiders” and who should be considered “outsiders” and how much their respective voices should be considered in the process.

A few quotes from participants:

- “I have lived in the area for about twenty-five years. I accepted the invitation because, when I was three, my mother married a black man. He was the only father I knew. I hear and see things as a white man. I am troubled by what I see and want to do something about it.”
- “I was born and raised here and have been here on both sides for generations. I have a tremendous commitment to this community. We have a chance to enhance the portrayal of African American life through this discussion.”
- “I’m here more personally as the descendant of slaveowners and Confederate soldiers, but also civil rights activists. History has to be looked at in its entirety and judged so. Your history is my history and my history is your history. Far too often, it has been selective in the telling.”
- “I don’t have a single ancestor who has lived more than 70 miles outside of here since the 1700s.”
- “The community is growing exponentially with people who weren’t born and raised here. There is a different energy from people who aren’t from here. They need to be encouraged to join the conversation. There might be half the city who haven’t been born and raised here - who don’t own a lot of this history here - not just this topic.”



- “When I look at the counties, they have a voice and should say their piece, but let Fredericksburg people make a decision - Fredericksburg really needs to take culpability and deal with this issue.”
- “Outsiders started the protests here.”
- “I don’t base anything on emotion and that’s what’s going on in this town. You can see that with those college kids. And, they don’t know anything about this town. I can’t tell you what it means to drive down the street and see generals’ names and know their sacrifice.”
- “We have roots so deep here that it is offensive when people who aren’t from here try to give opinions.”
- “I’ve walked past it [the auction block] for eighteen years and I never knew what it was until it was just recently brought to my attention.”

For those who participated, **there were a variety of reasons for why they attended the focus groups.** The Coalition recognizes that there are people in the community who did not meet with the Coalition and that their opinions may differ from the quotes below.

A few quotes from participants:

- “It is a discussion in our home - the slave block. We are multigenerational in my home - from my 85 year old mother (leave it there so ‘they’ can see it), my brothers and sisters (take it up and be educational elsewhere), my sons (bust it up). I am struck by my uncle who took a picture being up on the slave block for a Caucasian and got a quarter for it - my grandfather gave him a whipping to remind him never to do it again. Same tool, different lesson - before we would have gotten a whipping for being a slave.”
- “I have been interested in Fredericksburg since I was a small kid. My grandmother’s grandmother saw her brother sold at the slave block. She never wanted us to forget. That is one of the reasons why I’ve always been interested.”
- “I want there to be a conversation. I’m glad that it’s happening. The way we got into it was counterproductive.”
- “I ignored it, it was a point of shame. It is history and it is fact and I’m no longer ashamed. I want to see what is going on. I don’t want to be sitting on the sidelines; I want to be a participant. It makes me feel like I have an opportunity to be heard.”
- “I feel legitimized. I feel affirmed. I feel proud to walk through the door to speak - that my experience is being valued. You don’t know my story - now someone is listening to my story.”
- “Uprooting history is ruining tourism. If they destroy our history, they will destroy our tourism.”



- “I have lived blocks from the slave block my entire life. I always used it to fuel my understanding that this is what white people did to me. I am very cautious that the city will use me to say that I have endorsed it and that everything is ok. The full picture - white people are voting like this is a tourist thing and they have no role in this history at all.... Like they don't feel the pain, like they don't understand the pain, like they aren't a part of this at all - they don't feel the collective guilt.”
- “We want to have a strong, healthy community and if we want that then we have to participate.”
- “In growing up, my mother made sure to always avoid the corner. We didn't go down the street if we didn't have to. My mother didn't allow us over there. It was a degrading stone to her.”
- “Living here, I am here to see it daily. We didn't deliberately go to see the auction block. I almost tried to distance myself, if I was walking down the street, I would avoid it.”
- “I was really disappointed that the NAACP's position wasn't heard and that Charlie ended up being the lone soldier. It felt like it went back to the old order where white folks got their way without African American folks being heard. They let the feedback come from more than just local citizens. And, we are now here to make it better.”

“Young people” were referenced quite often by participants. More often than not, it was to say what participants believed about young people - rather than a young person being in the room to speak for themselves. Of over 140 participants, there were three college students and twelve high school students who participated in various discussions.

A few quotes from participants:

- “I spend a considerable amount of time mentoring young people of color. Although it is a painful part of history, there are a lot of contributions - being able to achieve despite obstacles. That is not really taught anywhere, or taught in a limited sense. Many of those young people would have links to people who accomplished things despite the obstacles. They need to feel a sense of pride too and that will help them in other avenues of their lives.”
- “Our youth want the slave block removed.”
- “Look at how far you've come - we don't do a good job of reminding our kids of our history. It's hard for them to relate. Our parents protected us from racism, discrimination and things of that nature when we were kids. They never told us why. How do we preserve it, protect it, tell the story for future generations?”
- “We [young people] want to determine some things - the future history of Fredericksburg.”



- “I don’t think that, in my work with kids, they have any sense of pride in being from Fredericksburg. To be honest, when I left for college, I never thought that I would come back here. Now I’m back here and I couldn’t think of a better place to be.”

Participants often brought up three different words in reference to the slave auction block: **memorial, artifact, and monument**. While not solely along racial lines, the different words used often coincided with the emotional distance people put between themselves and the slave auction block. Those who were more emotionally distant used the word “artifact” while those who were more emotionally invested used the word “memorial.”

A few quotes from participants:

- “The slave block stood out as being an incredibly important artifact that was woefully interpreted. The plaque is both hard to see and it doesn’t really say much.”
- “It’s an artifact. Not a monument - I think that the conversation around artifacts is different.”
- “Those monuments were psychological warfare. Those were reminders of their oppressors. For me, when I see those around, I see that undercover racism and I am more sensitive to it. The slave block is an artifact; its needs to be protected, preserved, and presented better.”
- “I think that there is a distinction between memorial and artifact. One defines that place and time and another comes later. I want it to be a yes/and, not an either/or.”
- “To me, the auction block is sacred - perhaps holy. There is so much discussion about everything else that they auctioned - not just people. To me it is a sacred space. I take a moment with God and do the cross, kiss my hand, and put my hand on the block. I fight every day for what happened there. We need to be the best we can be because of what happened there.”
- “There are very different things in terms of artifacts, memorials, and monuments. This wasn’t put up to memorialize.”
- “The trivialization of artifacts is a huge problem. That artifact becomes invisible after a while.... That is not the understanding that we want it to have, that it needs to have. It’s about respect. If people want us to respect their history, they need to include the true history.”
- “I take a rose and kneel down to pray. One time, a woman from the butcher shop came and held my hand with me. Another stopped and joined....”
- “Well, all the other monuments were supposed to be protected by law as well. If you do one, you do all - its a domino effect. Chip away. Chip away. Things getting uprooted left and right. It just trickles.”



- “The slave block deserves more than to sit on the ground.”

While participants may see the slave auction block from many different viewpoints, **all of the focus groups had concerns about the preservation, protection, and interpretation connected to the slave auction block**; most consistent was the need to protect the slave auction block from people who are currently disrespecting it (whether intentionally or unintentionally).

- “There have been a couple of moments when I thought it was going to go south and be really racialized. It hasn’t appeared to become a black-white issue in that sense.”
- “There’s like an ‘Old Fredericksburg’ and a ‘New Fredericksburg.’ It’s more of a subtle presence here of the Old South. It’s all about the celebration of the Confederate ancestors - it’s all there, just subtle. They’ve been keeping their heads down specifically about the auction block. I believe that if there were a Confederate monument, they would have a much more visible presence during this discussion.”
- “It was there way before the Civil War and it was used to auction everything from cotton, tobacco, sacks of potatoes, humans...all of those things should be listed. Being a southern boy, I know that not one slave was sold on that auction block that was from another country.”
- “I want it to have appropriate preservation and respect.... That people don’t spit on it, or sit on it, or let their dogs poop on it.”
- “People stand on it. Treat it casually. There is no sense of respect that I’ve observed. Feel a sense of reverence. It is disturbing to me that there is this artifact that is presented in such a way that people can disrespect it. Children climb all over it. There should be a sense of reverence.”
- “I’m just really, really concerned about someone destroying it overnight - and it could come from anyone. Some of my friends have said that they would want it destroyed.”
- “Fredericksburg has kept the peace partly from avoidance and partly from the religious leaders across color lines. I think that it is obvious that there is an economic, geographic, etc. division that has clearly been there a long time. Yes, it is the avoidance and exclusion that keeps the peace.”
- “We don’t want to see it explode because nothing ends up getting done. If we look at the pattern of time and events, Fredericksburg is just about due. You can see people...beginning to get a little nervous.”
- “You can’t tell me that the political winds didn’t bring us to this table. People had their feelings about the slave block, but went about their business. Since the election, things have changed.”



- “I think that people don’t really understand the process. And, I don’t know that the city knows how to disseminate that. How do we get that process out to people? I get a call every few days to say, ‘Nothing is happening. What is going on with the slave block?’ I think that is why people are pretty wary about all of this - and, that is not just one race or another.”
- “I think we do have a real race issue. We were moving from our first home in the area and one of the neighbors, a white lady, engaged me in conversation and said, ‘I don’t like this town. It’s racist.’ And, I was like, ‘Really?’ She said that you hear it as you are just listening as you go about your daily routine, like when you pick up your kids from the school or are standing in line at the store.”
- “Ignorance is just a big problem in this community - standing on it, throwing trash on it. People don’t understand the gravity of the slave block. There is still so much racism in Fredericksburg. There are black people who are triggered by the auction block while some white people laugh at it.”

Participants often referenced a need to tell the “**complete story.**” This phrase generally revolved around **three ideas**: the realities of slavery (that it happened, it happened here, and it deeply and negatively affected the people it touched); that African Americans in Fredericksburg were not and are not defined by slavery or segregation; and, that African Americans have a rich history of accomplishment and contribution in the area. Many spoke about the **importance of whose voice will be elevated** in the narrative.

A few quotes from participants:

- “That plaque is so insignificant; it’s almost like it was written by a slaveowner because it’s so dismissive and objectifying.”
- “We’ve got monuments or commemorative plaques all over this region. It seems to me that if we would take the time to give an explanation behind a cannon being in a location where the use and purpose would be pretty obvious - but we still take the time to explain it - then it seems to me, at the very least, the slave block, which has so much meaning, deserves more explanation.”
- “Fredericksburg is ready for the discussion. I think that Fredericksburg is a historical city and a gem, but it does not often talk about race or slavery as part of its narrative. It’s very uncomfortable. You talk about the Civil War, but you don’t talk about the full scope of what happened. I think doing so may advance Fredericksburg.”
- “It’s really who is telling the story and what part of the story people want to tell.”



- “We can’t tell the whole story without telling the whole story; we can’t tell the celebratory parts without telling the hardship as well.”
- “Often, we don’t know the common threads that we actually do have. It will help people in healing [to tell multiple stories]. They don’t have to combat.... Let’s let everyone talk who wants to talk.”
- “Often I think we forget the human side of what we talk about with slavery. I think that there is a greater story within the story of slavery that is about dignity, humanity, families within a system that was intent on stripping that away. The auction block is at the core of what that system did.”
- “I think that there were some hurt feelings when the decision was to leave it - ‘Again we were dismissed.’ There is just a disconnect. The experiences are just so radically different when you are white or black in this country - our lenses are just so different.”
- “We feel an urgency to get the story out. People are asking and we don’t have the full story. It sucks when we turn people away without the whole story and know that they may never come back. We aren’t educated about what the story is. And, it’s not our story to tell.”
- “Someone said to me, ‘History is history.’ And, I was like, ‘It’s really not.’ Her history is entirely different from mine and mine is so different from others.”

Participants had many things to say about what **their greatest disappointments and/or greatest aspirations** would be for the process. Most often, participants feared that nothing would end up being done.

- “My greatest disappointment would be if voices like mine, professionals, were privileged over the voices of people in the community.”
- “The greatest disappointment would be if people don’t know what’s going on and if we don’t share the information we have to make informed decisions.”
- “There is no greater disappointment. Nothing has been done - that is the norm. It wouldn’t be disappointment; it is the norm. I rarely see another outcome. One that is inclusive of the black community when they go to speak to something. The few blacks who showed up for the other meeting.... We thought, maybe too many of us showed up and now it’s fallen away because we were too interested. It is what we expect from Fredericksburg. ‘Too many of us came.’ We fear we won’t be called in when the next piece happens.”
- “My greatest disappointment would be if it causes more isolation and polarization. The people who depend on us to be their voice will think we failed them and that it is business as usual. My hope is that we will make major progress and let this be the springboard for more good things to happen.”



- “My greatest disappointment would be if we did nothing. I think that there is a lot of fear of that. That would be wrong and terrible. It has just happened before that there is no follow through - not just with racial things. It’s just a sense of wait and see here. It’s happened before. I don’t know that we have ever done something to THIS depth before - in terms of the auction block and this history. I think for people to feel comfortable, they are going to have to see clear steps. There needs to be constant communication.”
- “More to it than words and thoughts. We need to find a common space where everyone is pulling on the same rope in the same direction and with the same purpose - we are a long way away from that. Hopefully you will be here long enough to see who is pulling with the same purpose. There is a difference between solving a problem and trying to make a problem go away. I don’t know how many people recognize really what the problem is. How many people can see through the block to the deeper issues?”
- “It’s easy to get seduced into thinking that solving the ‘geography’ will solve the problem. Getting the site right won’t solve anything. That would be singularly unimpressive to me.”
- “If it was still kept the way it is now. If we are still talking about it a year from now. If people are still able to touch and disrespect it. If people are still ‘chit chatting’ that wouldn’t work for me.”

ANALYSIS OF PRINTED AND WEB-BASED MATERIALS:

Participants often noted, “that is too much for one block or one little corner to tell.” Though the auction block is a key part of the stories of the space, **telling the “complete story” is a task that must involve utilizing brochures, tours, podcasts, websites, films, and more.** These materials have been produced over a number of decades and by numerous authors. There is nuance and variety to these publications, but they do share several common traits; and, taken as a whole, produce noticeable effects. Exceptions can be found to most of the following findings. However, this report speaks to the balance of experience rather than every individual instance.

These findings also primarily focus on the city-sponsored printed and web-based materials that reference African Americans and slavery or are “tentpole” parts of the city’s presentation of public history. While there are many historical narratives beyond these that deserve focus, attention, and review, the scope of this project must remain centered on the slave auction block and the (broader) African American History of Fredericksburg that contextualizes it.

Overall, it is clear that the city is increasingly attempting to incorporate African American History into its presentation of the city’s history. While this is unevenly executed, the increasing quality of some of the more recent publications is noticeable. However, **all of these publications leave room for growth as they move towards recognizing the centrality, agency, complexity, and ownership of this history.**



Findings fall into four categories, which will be discussed in more detail below. Those categories are:

- Access of narrative
- Centrality to narrative
- Complexity and agency in narrative
- Frame and voice of narrative

Access of Narrative

Focus group participants frequently referred to African American History as: unknown, hidden, forgotten, or lost. They also commonly lamented how little of these stories is known by residents generally and to young people in particular. Having easy and consistent access to narratives is a key component of telling and knowing the “complete story.” While recent efforts have been made to expand the number of places telling these stories, access remains sporadic.

Work has been done to deepen the level of knowledge of much of this history, but in contrast to stories of Washington, Madison, or the Civil War, histories of African Americans often require intentional work to find and hear. This can be seen in Fredericksburg’s guided tours and public signage.

- Currently, the default tour for the “Trolley Tours” is a general history of Fredericksburg. This tour provides a general overview of Fredericksburg history and is a good opportunity to introduce the city’s stories. The tour does not currently tell the “complete story.” Based on a script provided, **the tour names eighty-five people by name: eighty-four are white, one is Native American, and none are Black.** Only two references to Black people are present in the script: at Shiloh Old Site and a brief mention of slavery at the slave auction block itself. There is no other mention of slavery, segregation, or efforts to survive or end either.
- This gap begins at a foundational level for the tour; **the preliminary take home test for guides asks one question about a named African American (out of fifty-five questions), the follow up test asks eight questions about history involving African Americans out of eighty-two.** Additionally, participants in the focus groups described the tour guides as generally being uncomfortable discussing issues of race and slavery, particularly with African American visitors. While the main tour limits access to information because of what it *does not* include, the African American tour limits access to information by *only* being available by special request and requiring advance bookings of eighteen participants or more. The visitor center staff does offer brochures when asked and attempts to connect visitors to local guides who lead tours.



- The analysis of the public signage is very similar to that of the city's tours. Professor Steve Hanna of The University of Mary Washington has worked to map the public history signage in Fredericksburg. With recent, notable, and laudable exceptions, the majority of the signage (not all city-controlled) does not include the "complete story" of African American history in Fredericksburg. **As of 2014, twenty-seven of the 277 historical markers in the city referenced African Americans.** They largely focus on white Americans during the founding and Civil War eras. Recent efforts have made improvements in this regard, but have not redressed the imbalance.

Centrality to Narrative

Focus group participants cited an interest in increasing the quantity and quality of stories that are focused on African Americans as the central figures, not just as people mentioned. Currently, African Americans are unevenly included in public history materials.

- The Official Fredericksburg Visitor's Guide serves as a good example of this. African American History is a key part of John Hennessy's introduction to the guide; however, following that, African American History takes a distinctly secondary role to the central narrative of (white) Fredericksburg as is written throughout the rest of the guide. For example, in the chronology of Fredericksburg, the only references to African Americans may be seen in an 1835 census and sit-ins in 1960. While occasionally central through the rest of the guide (ex. pages 54, 63-66), African Americans often appear as addenda to the primary content. For example, on page 28, a cemetery marker for African Americans is mentioned in the last sentence of a description of the War Memorial. This can also be seen in the Visitor Center film where few African Americans appear; and, when they do, it is as a brief discussion of United States Colored Troops during the Civil War.
- **Much of the city's official material has a tendency to, even when telling stories about African Americans, focus on the lives and actions of white Fredericksburg residents.** An example from the African American History brochure exemplifies this. When the brochure talks about the slave auction block, it provides two sentences about its factual history and then concludes with the sentence, "Before buying a slave, a potential owner would check the slave's health, stamina, and disposition." The focus and attention in this sentence is very much on the white purchaser as an informed and thoughtful consumer rather than on the enslaved person and the human rights violation that person was experiencing. The brochure also shows the tendency to spotlight white people while telling African American History by who it chooses to mention and name. **In its entirety, the city's African American History brochure explicitly names seven black people and thirteen white people.**



- One of the distinct challenges Fredericksburg faces is that the most common vehicle for storytelling, in city publications, are historic structures. This takes advantage of Fredericksburg's rich architectural history and the authentic setting for the storytelling those structures provide. However, this often has the consequence of frequently excluding African Americans who, though present, did not own the largest, most centrally-located, or best-preserved homes. **The result of this is that in the three walking tours of Washington, Hanover, and Lower Caroline Streets, as well as the Mill Sites and Water Power tour, there are no appearances or mentions of African Americans.**

Complexity of Roles and Agency

A frequently repeated desire, during the focus groups, was that **reinterpretation of the slave auction block would support young African Americans (specifically)** in reimagining what they are capable of and encourage them to pursue great futures for themselves and their communities. Crucial to doing so, as was regularly pointed out in focus group sessions, is that African Americans should not just be present and central in stories, but that they also must have agency; African Americans in the narratives must be seen as actors who affect their own destinies and strive for and achieve their own goals.

- **The quality of presentation matters just as much as the quantity.** Hampering this potential across the current material is that African Americans are rarely, if ever, shown as their white counterparts are, as: family members, educators, entrepreneurs, writers, politicians, artists, architects, scientists, doctors, lawyers, leaders, creators, builders, wealth holders, community pillars, etc. And, while the systems of slavery and segregation have shaped the structure of many residents' lives, they did not (and do not) define their humanity.
- **Materials tend to limit agency for African Americans;** for example, a section of the African American History brochure reads, "Most slavers sold their cargoes while sailing up the river and often the prime, young slaves were sold further downstream. Also along the river in the antebellum era were slave pens, where slaves were kept until they were sold or taken down south by slave traders known as "Georgy" men." The people taking action in this version of history are the slavers and the "Georgy" men, while the African Americans are mute, confined, transported, and referred to as objects (cargo). This example shows neither agency nor humanity for African Americans historically and it shows a lack of respect for African Americans contemporarily. **It is the overwhelming power of slavery and segregation that make the examples of small and large acts of personal choice and control carried out all the more poignant and important.** Choices about family, love, personal relationships, art, music and creativity and acts of resistance, education, charity, and self-destruction all provide relevant examples of the way in which people lived, endured and expressed their humanity.



- An additional aspect of agency that future interpretation should consider is the agency involved in when and how the institutions of slavery and segregation were built, supported, and implemented and the roles individuals played in doing so. **While no one act defines an individual, individuals are responsible for both the good and harm of their actions and “the complete story” must be able to honestly acknowledge the impact of personal and societal choices.** For example, in print, almost no one is identified as a slave owner and the implications of this ownership are never presented. Furthermore, the limited number of identifications that do exist in the print materials, taken as a whole, present a problematic depiction of slave ownership in the city. **Of people specifically named and identified as slave owners, two are white women (one being associated with John Washington and the other associated with an attempt to manumit people), and one is a black man. Several white men are identified as slave traders, but they are non-residents and are presented as businessmen rather than as owners of other human beings.** This presents a misleading history of slave ownership, involvement and benefit in Fredericksburg.

Frame and Voice of Narrative

Present throughout all of the conversations with city residents has been a keen awareness of whose voices are heard and whose are silenced in spaces, both now and in the past. Across the spectrum of people the Coalition spoke with, participants often shared a desire to hear “hidden stories” about the wide swath of Fredericksburg history; and, stressed that those stories should be told through the voices of those who experienced them or whose lives have been deeply touched by them. For the community of Fredericksburg, this means telling complete and complex stories with attention to the interpretive boundaries being placed around Fredericksburg history.

- For example, the materials focus primarily on several key time periods (founding era and the Civil War), a particular geographic area (downtown), and a set of artifacts (historic structures, cemeteries and monuments). These boundaries position the community to tell some stories over others. Stories including African American communities will necessitate focusing on a broader swath of town in addition to the downtown core (while continuing to expand the narratives of those downtown spaces as well).
- The community should also think critically about the eras it chooses to emphasize. Fredericksburg does matter, in part, because of what happened there during the Revolutionary War and the Civil War. However, the stories of residents today are only partially explained by those eras. They also require the context of other times in order to be fully understood. In thinking about African American agency, particularly ideas of persistence, resistance, and triumph against oppressive systems, these are stories that unfold over decades and between generations as opposed to being contained within a short span of years.



NEXT STEPS (PHASE TWO):

Phase Two will begin the process of determining design aspects that the community feels to be most important when envisioning a future experience with the slave auction block. A series of two-hour, public brainstorming sessions should occur between August and September. During the first round in August, the community will review the findings from this report (regarding what was learned during Phase One) and have broad discussions about what the reinterpretation of the slave auction block may look like based on these findings. Once the overarching themes have been synthesized following the first round of Phase Two, the community will then come together again in September to discuss and refine these ideas more fully. At the end of Phase Two, the community should not expect to have one clear design in mind; rather, **the Coalition staff members will support the community in determining aspects that would lead to a future Request for Proposal by reflecting on and synthesizing what the community thinks will be important in moving forward with the reinterpretation of the slave auction block.**

APPENDIX:

Questions developed for the focus group discussions.

1. Why did you come today and how does it make you feel to be here in this moment?
2. What do you believe to be the main purpose of the slave auction block? What does the slave auction block represent to you?
3. What are the key stories and lessons the site has to offer?
4. In addition to the site itself, what objects, artifacts, images and media can help communicate the story to people who visit?
5. What do you see as the current greatest strengths and greatest weaknesses of the slave auction block?
6. What are some of the issues that are facing Fredericksburg today? What community issues have connected to and/or currently connect to the slave auction block?
7. How does the past of Fredericksburg connect to the conversations about the slave auction block that are taking place today?
8. What would be your greatest disappointment for the work around the slave auction block?
9. What is your highest aspiration for the slave auction block?
10. Who else's voice needs to be part of shaping the future of this space?