



News Release

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City of Fredericksburg Proceeds with Auction Block Relocation

(Fredericksburg, VA) June 5, 2020 – The City of Fredericksburg has removed the slave auction block on Friday, June 5, 2020. This is the significant step in living City Council’s directive to relocate the historic artifact, and to work to better tell a more complete history of Fredericksburg – specifically its storied African American history.

Where did this discussion begin? Councilor Charlie Frye raised the topic at the City Council meeting of August 22, 2017, immediately following the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. His proposal was for City Council to consider removing the block at its meeting in late September. The City Council engaged the community through a public forum at James Monroe High School attended by approximately 100 people, and an online survey with approximately 600 participants, before voting to keep the block in place, but with added historical context. Councilor Frye was the only dissenting vote on the motion for the auction block to “stay.” After this vote, City Council asked the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience (ICSC) to assist in leading the next steps.

Hundreds of City residents participated in the ensuing year-long community collaboration process led by the ICSC and City leaders. These community conversations occurred in small group settings over the course of more than a dozen meetings. The middle phase of these meetings focused specifically on the slave auction block and whether or how it could be interpreted adequately in place. Residents did not reach consensus on specifics, but they did articulate a broad-based desire that truth and truth-telling be central to all aspects of the process moving forward. The ICSC *Phase 3 Final Report* was released on March 14, 2019 at a special meeting of Council. The ICSC did not recommend a specific course of action with respect to the auction block, but it did call on the community to maintain its commitment to truth-telling, the acknowledgement of individual “agency,” and “telling the whole story.”

Mr. Frye placed the proposal to remove the auction block back before City Council on June 11, 2019. This time, City Council voted 6 to 1 to approve the relocation. Council members directed the City Manager to return with an action plan in July.

The action plan approved by City Council on July 9, 2019 included an application for a certificate of appropriateness, an operations plan for the removal and cleaning of the block under the supervision of professional archaeologists, an operations plan for repair of the sidewalk after removal of the block, plans for the transport of the block, and a path forward for a loan of the block to the Fredericksburg Area Museum.

City Council approved the final certificate of appropriateness and final loan agreement on November 12, 2019. The approval of the certificate of appropriateness was challenged in court, but the City prevailed.

However, legal obstacles to removal were not cleared until April 1, 2020, nearly three weeks after Governor Northam's *Declaration of a State of Emergency due to Novel Coronavirus (Covid-19)*. City staff prepared a revised plan to safely remove the stone block once Phase 2 of the Governor's reopening plan was set to begin.

Removal of this historic artifact has remained a priority. Crews began their work early in the morning to minimize pedestrian and vehicular conflicts later in the day. Stabilizing straps, weights, and mechanical equipment were used to lift the freed stone onto a custom-designed pallet intended to support the approximately 800-pound artifact. Dovetail Cultural Resource Group provided oversight of the removal operation.

The auction block had become a focus of local protesters over the past week, serving as a way stop along procession routes on multiple days of demonstrations. "Move the block!" became a chant of those protesting the death of George Floyd in Minnesota. The block was spray-painted with graffiti twice over the course of the days of protest.

"As the only minority on City Council, I felt the weight of the world on my shoulders," Councilor Frye said. "The people of the City never walked away from the table, never stopped talking to each other. This was huge – and it felt great because I came from ancestors who were never heard."

Fredericksburg Mayor Mary Katherine Greenlaw reflected on James Baldwin's quote: "History, as nearly no one seems to know, is not merely something to be read. And it does not refer merely, or even principally, to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, we are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do." "Truer words never spoken," she concluded.

For more information on the slave auction block please visit www.Fredericksburgva.gov/1287/Slave-Auction-Block or please feel free to call the City Manager's office at 540-372-1010.

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