

Fig. 1.

Old Slave Block postcard,
Fredericksburg Area
Museum Collection.

EXHIBITING AND INTERPRETING THE AUCTION BLOCK IN FREDERICKSBURG, VIRGINIA

Dr. Gaila Sims, Theresa Cramer

In October 2020, a 1,200-pound sandstone relic arrived at the Fredericksburg Area Museum (FAM). Associated with the sale of enslaved people, the Auction Block was relocated to FAM from its original corner in downtown Fredericksburg, Virginia, after years of community conversations. Committed to the careful interpretation of a challenging object with immense historical and emotional significance, museum staff conducted extensive research and connected with diverse community members to develop *A Monumental Weight: The Auction Block in Fredericksburg, Virginia*.

A MONUMENTAL

Combining historical documentation with the historiography of slavery, and bolstered by community engagement, *A Monumental Weight* exemplifies the power, possibilities, and problems of placemaking within the museum setting.

We adhere to the definition of placemaking as creating public spaces that serve the community and improve public life.¹ Most historic preservation and public history professionals associate placemaking with the preservation of local historic sites, not their removal. However, community is the essence of placemaking, and a significant segment of the local Black community did not feel that the Auction Block in situ served Fredericksburg. At the time of the Block's removal, there was little interpretation of the object and nowhere to stop and reflect: more space was needed to tell a fuller story of enslavement and the experiences of enslaved people. The removal of

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OLD SLAVE BLOCK, FREDERICKSBURG, VA.

RESPONSIBILITY

the Block cannot erase the history and violence that occurred on that corner, and we are working alongside community members to create recommendations for interpretation at the corner where the Block originally stood. This article, however, speaks only about the physical and digital exhibitions at FAM.

FREDERICKSBURG'S AUCTION BLOCK

The Auction Block, often referred to throughout its existence as the “Slave Block,” “Slave Auction Block,” and “the Block,” is believed to have been installed at the corner of William and Charles Streets in downtown Fredericksburg around 1843, when a nearby hotel was built (fig. 1). Researchers have collected evidence of at least 20 sales of enslaved people that took place there between 1847 and 1862, involving more than 300 enslaved individuals overall.²

In 2017, following the violent “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, Fredericksburg City Councilor Charlie L. Frye, Jr. brought a vote to his fellow council members to relocate the Block, and though they voted 6-1 to leave it where it was, his action initiated a citywide conversation about the Block and the representation of African American history in the city, led by the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience (ICSC). The ICSC conducted focus groups, brainstorming sessions, and public forums to gather community feedback.³ Some wanted the Block to stay, with one participant noting:

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.

Fig. 2.

The Auction Block in
A Monumental Weight.

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.

Some wanted it moved to a site better equipped to tell a more complete story of its history:

I want the Slave Auction Block moved to a museum where the whole story can be told. Put a marker or something in its place. I have taken a number of African American tours in the city and the Block is the most depressing.

Ultimately, City Council decided to hold another vote about its proposed relocation and, on June 11, 2019, voted 6-1 to move it to FAM.

Unfortunately, the city was not able to begin the process of relocation right away, and the Block remained on the corner when protests against police brutality and racial injustice swept across the United States in the summer of 2020. Protestors organized demonstrations throughout the city of Fredericksburg, with the Block a particularly visible symbol of the legacies of racial injustice they intended to challenge. The Auction Block was finally removed from the corner and placed at FAM in October 2020, where the museum installed an accompanying temporary exhibition soon afterward.⁴

The authors of this article, Dr. Gaila Sims, Curator of African American History and Special Projects, and Theresa Cramer, Education and Public Programs Coordinator, worked in close collaboration to develop an updated, expanded exhibition surrounding the immensely difficult object now occupying the museum's first floor.

PROBLEMS

Our biggest problem was creating a sense of place for an object removed from its original location. We

recognized that visitors to the exhibition would have wildly different relationships with the object, viewpoints, and backgrounds. We wanted to create a space that felt safe for African American visitors, that recognized the immense pain associated with the Block, that delved into the specific history of slavery in the city and in the state, and that would provoke empathy and learning for diverse visitors.

The profanity graffitied on the object's surface presented an additional challenge (fig. 2). The Block was spray-painted several times during the June 2020 protests. Local archaeologists recommended against attempting the graffiti's removal to avoid damaging or destroying the fragile sandstone. We recognize the polarizing emotions sparked by the graffiti: older visitors often find it disturbing and disrespectful and urge the museum to remove it, while younger visitors frequently share that they understand the anger and pain of its authors. As the Auction Block belongs to the City of Fredericksburg and is on long-term loan to the museum, decisions surrounding the graffiti remain with City Council; however, exhibition staff worked to find ways to minimize its impact and explain its presence.

Museum staff conducted front-end evaluation with extensive community engagement and formative interviews. One frequently raised issue was related to the Block's placement: because of the Block's weight, it was necessary to position it on the first floor of the museum, and the temporary exhibit included a partition concealing the Block from immediate view. Community members expressed concern about the first-floor placement and explicitly opposed the partition. To address these issues, staff removed the partition, allowing greater access to the Block, and included several panels placed throughout the first floor explaining the Block's heaviness and the necessity of its placement on the bottom floor, along with other objects of similar heft. Visitors have conveyed gratitude for this transparency.

Community Conversations

Following three years of community dialogue, Fredericksburg City Council voted to relocate the Auction Block in 2019. COVID slowed its removal and in 2020, the Block became the focus of several protests in the city of Fredericksburg.



The Auction Block was the site of Black Lives Matter protests in 2018 and became a focal point during protests in Fredericksburg in summer 2020.

Right: City staff and protesters signed from Downtown Cultural Resource Group, arrested, to move, and cleaned the Block before moving it to FAM.

City Councilor Hansford Turner advocated for the removal of the Auction Block in 2005. After the "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia in August 2017, City Councilor Charlie L. Prys, Jr. moved for a vote to relocate the Block from its original location. City Council initially decided against removal, but initiated a citywide conversation about the Block and the representation of African American history in the city.

They convened focus groups and public forums to gather community feedback and found that for many, the Auction Block served as a symbol of the ongoing pain of racial inequality. On June 11, 2019, City Council voted to remove the Block and relocate it to the FAM.

COVID delayed its removal, and in the summer of 2020 the Block, a symbol of oppression, became the site of protests against police brutality and racial inequity. The Block was removed in June 2020. It arrived at the FAM in October 2020.



SWIS NHOT



POSSIBILITIES

In developing the exhibition, Dr. Sims read through the plentiful newspaper articles written about the Block's history and relocation, the ICSC reports, all available research gathered by local historians related to the Block and African American history in Fredericksburg, and slave narratives from the Commonwealth of Virginia. Additionally, she scoured social media, including Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, for mentions of the Auction Block, and read through petitions for its removal that circulated prior to its relocation.

The museum's African American History Committee oversaw the entirety of the exhibition's development. Established in August 2022, this committee consists of representatives from FAM's staff and Board of Directors, the City of Fredericksburg, local scholars and educators, leaders from nearby businesses and nonprofits, and community members. In addition to the African American History Committee, the exhibition curator met one-on-one and in small groups with dozens of African American community members of all ages, sharing the exhibition's concept plan, collecting feedback, and, above all else, listening and learning.

We recognized how essential it was to establish trust with community members and hear from them how they felt about the museum, about the city, and about the Auction Block. We acknowledged our own

positionality – Gaila as a mixed-race woman newly arrived in the community, and Theresa, a white woman and five-year city resident – and made ourselves as available as possible. We established close relationships with many people of different backgrounds and were privileged to hear from them stories of Black life in this area, knowledge of the history of this city that few others have been able to learn, and memories surrounding the object that has held such pain for so many people for so long.

A MONUMENTAL WEIGHT

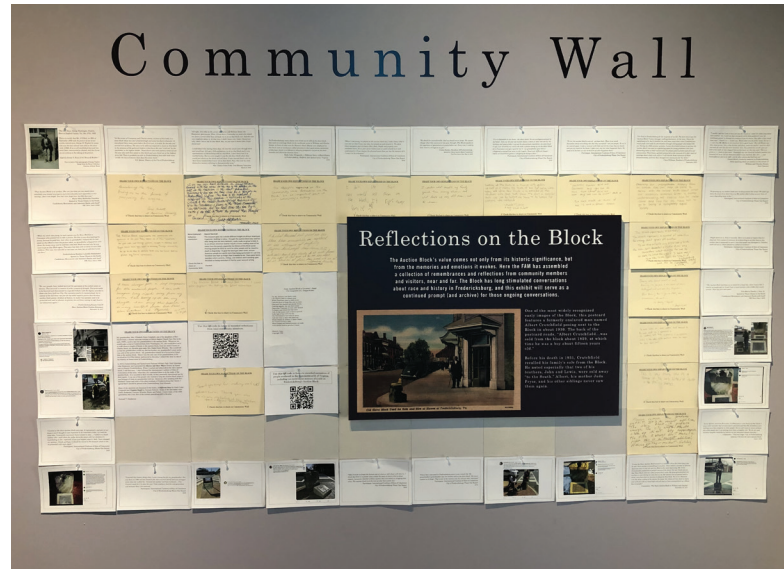
Our intention with the resulting exhibition is for people to leave with some understanding of the historical and emotional weight of this monumental object. A large photograph of the Block on its original streetscape occupies the wall behind the Block, with the physical Block placed directly in front of its vinyl counterpart. This design choice serves as a memory prompt for those who encountered it on the street and provides context for those who did not. To the left of the Block are several panels exploring the history of the object, Virginia's role in the larger trade in enslaved people,⁵ and the community conversations that led to the Block's relocation from 2017 to 2020 (fig. 3). A large panel to the right answers some of the most frequently asked questions about the object, including its height and weight, original function, and why the graffiti on its surface has not been removed. In addition to sharing more information about the graffiti itself, the museum has now situated the Block to obscure the

Fig. 3. Museum visitors read Auction Block exhibit panels.

most noticeable profanity, lessening its impact while continuing to acknowledge its presence.

The other side of the exhibition focuses on the emotional weight of the object. The community wall features oral histories, written references, and social media posts from area residents, museum visitors, and other interested parties (fig. 4). We continue to add reflections shared by museum visitors to the community wall, understanding that participation is integral in helping visitors process their museum experiences.⁶ Finally, we built a Reflection Space, inspired by Toni Morrison’s *Bench by the Road* Project (fig. 5). In a 1989 interview with *World Magazine*, Morrison remarked, “There is no place you or I can go, to think about or not think about, to summon the presences of, or recollect the absences of slaves.... There is no suitable memorial, or plaque, or wreath, or wall, or park, or skyscraper lobby. There’s no 300-foot tower, there’s no small bench by the road.”⁷ In the ICSC Phase One Report, one participant noted, “To me, the auction block is sacred – perhaps holy...I take a moment with God and do the cross, kiss my hand, and put my hand on the block,” while another wrote of the Block’s position on the street, “People stand on it. Treat it casually. There is no sense of respect that I’ve observed. Feel a sense of reverence.” The bench in this space provides visitors with a place to feel that sense of reverence and respect, to rest and reflect on the significance of the Auction Block, its painful history, and the men, women, and children who experienced the horrors of slavery firsthand.

Images have been carefully placed throughout the exhibition. While we have not recovered any images of enslaved people on or near the Block prior to the end of the Civil War, the exhibit features several photographs of men sold from the corner, all taken after slavery had been abolished. This includes an image of George Triplett, believed to be the last enslaved person sold from the corner in 1862, and a postcard of a formerly enslaved man named Albert Crutchfield posing next to the Block in 1931.



GAILA SIMS



GAILA SIMS

Fig. 4. (top) Community Wall.

Fig. 5. (bottom) Reflection Space.

The bench in this space provides visitors with a place to feel that sense of reverence and respect, to rest and reflect on the significance of the Auction Block, its painful history, and the men, women, and children who experienced the horrors of slavery firsthand.

Fig. 6.

Fredericksburg City Council members at exhibition opening.

Julia Rose’s Commemorative Museum Pedagogy, which argues for the importance of individual stories in sparking empathy in museum visitors as an integral part of the multidimensional interpretation of slavery, inspired Triplett’s and Crutchfield’s inclusion.⁸

VIRTUAL EXHIBITION

From the beginning, we understood that some people would not be able to visit the exhibition in person, and there was little room in the small gallery space to encompass everything we had collected. Thus, we also created a digital exhibition, funded by a grant from Virginia Humanities, to provide further access and additional information. While the content and themes of the physical and digital exhibitions remain the same, the digital contains more primary sources and first-person narratives.

The narratives provide personal stories of pain and resistance, and their inclusion in the digital exhibit encourages deeper understanding of the emotional toll of slavery.

The digital exhibition utilizes storytelling to create a sense of place, enhancing and contextualizing the virtual experience of the Auction Block. It includes eight recordings of Works Progress Administration (WPA) Slave Narratives performed by two local actresses. We recognize the limitations of the WPA Narratives, including the power imbalances between the interviewers and interviewees, the length of time between the period of enslavement and the interviews, and the fact that the interviews were often recorded using stereotypical Black dialect. However, we agree with the many scholars who conclude that these narratives remain invaluable in accessing information about the experiences of enslaved people. The narratives provide personal stories of pain and resistance, and their inclusion in the digital exhibit

encourages deeper understanding of the emotional toll of slavery.

While the digital exhibition was not created specifically for school audiences, staff believed its content and primary sources would benefit local educators. In January 2023, FAM distributed an outreach email to high school social studies teachers and curriculum coordinators in VA-Planning District 16, with a description of the digital Auction Block exhibition and available primary sources. Ms. Cramer reviewed the current state curriculum and made sure the correlating classes and state learning standards were included in all teacher communications. Staff are aware of the financial and physical barriers that deter schools from off-site field trips. Digital resources are extremely important in teaching history and can offer accessible ways for students to learn about the institution of slavery in their local area. An outcome of this outreach was that FAM formed a new relationship with Caroline County Public Schools and their African American history teachers.

PROGRAMMING

Public programming was developed to foster transparency, community conversations, and to increase exhibition access. Before the exhibition’s opening, FAM hosted a lecture with Dr. Sims about her career, academic research, and the museum’s projects related to African American history, including the Auction Block exhibition. The program gave interested community members an opportunity to meet and speak with Dr. Sims, Ms. Cramer, and other museum staff. *A Monumental Weight* opened with a well-attended public gathering on November 5, 2022, which included remarks from City Councilor Frye, the architect of the Block’s removal, and local Black community leaders (fig. 6).

Community engagement has not concluded with the exhibition’s opening. We continue to give formal and informal tours to community members, including an event with a group of youth and mentors from



a local Black fraternity. Before the Auction Block’s removal, community members expressed concern that the relocation of the Auction Block would limit the community’s access to the object. Museum staff scheduled multiple free presentations to ensure the public could view the exhibition during the museum’s yearly winter closure. Private presentations were set up for local university groups, museum professionals, and church organizations.

Like the formative one-on-one meetings and focus groups, exhibition tours and conversations provided staff with summative feedback. Instead of asking what community members want to see in an exhibition, tour guides ask them their thoughts on the new exhibition and encourage tour participants to share their reflections about the Block verbally or on the community wall. Reflections submitted by tour participants include, “This museum gave me a whole different insight on African Americans in general. Walking in today, I thought the auction block was cool but after being told the story behind it, really made me grow to hate it,” from a local African American student; and, “Testimony to the growth of the entire Fredericksburg community and to the resilience and grace of the Black community in particular,” submitted by a local Black elder.

LIMITATIONS

A Monumental Weight demonstrates the way museums must carefully balance their desire for data and insights gleaned from formal evaluation with the needs, emotions, and well-being of their communities. The ICSC reports were an essential front-end study that included formal assessment. FAM’s own formative and summative studies were based on informal interviews and focus groups. Staff considered conducting a timing-and-tracking study and formal in-person interviews in the exhibition, but its content discouraged these evaluation methodologies. We prioritize the care of Black visitors and believe that it would be unethical to observe people in such an emotionally charged space. Staff are aware that people of color do not always feel welcome in museums, and we do not want them to feel monitored or studied. Staff do plan to create an optional survey for exhibition group-tour and field-trip participants.

POWER

When public conversations around the removal of Confederate monuments and memorials spread across the country, the Auction Block became a major focal point in local and national media,⁹ despite the

fact that it is neither monument nor memorial, and not associated with the Lost Cause narrative at all. Fredericksburg's Auction Block is a powerful artifact representing memory, history, violence, and pain, and its position now in a museum allows for greater and more careful interpretation than what was possible on its original street corner.

In *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, Katherine McKittrick writes of the auction block on the Green Hill Plantation, "What is seen here is also produced through psychic-imaginary means and...the site of memory. Our imaginations can fill the empty space and recover the undocumented. We give this site its peopled history and stories."¹⁰ McKittrick argues that the chunks of stone that we know as auction blocks are only significant because of what we associate with them, that our memories and emotions and reactions imbue them with their power. *A Monumental Weight* embraces McKittrick's claim, recognizing that, though the Block's relocation might have removed some of its original context, museums can participate in placemaking by embracing community feedback, honoring community needs, and carefully and consciously foregrounding community interpretation of objects.

Museum professionals do not know what experiences their visitors bring with them when they visit an exhibition. Some community members might not even feel comfortable walking in your doors. To create exhibitions that serve communities and improve public life, museums must open their spaces and *listen*. FAM's interpretation and design were developed with the Fredericksburg community in mind. While we acknowledge that other museums have different missions, relationships with their visitors, and collections, we believe community-first strategies are broadly applicable and can be widely adopted by our colleagues across the field.

Our success can be measured by the thoughtful, compelling reflections we've received for the community wall. Visitors of various ages, races, genders, and localities have left comments indicating their satisfaction with the exhibition, ranging from, "Thank you for saving this for us to see and remember the horrors of slavery," from a Massachusetts-based couple; to, "The memories I have of this block are seeing someone use it to stretch for a jog and another person use it as a prop in photos. I am grateful to see it here, allowed the space for peace and reflection. Thank you," from a Fredericksburg local. And, perhaps most encouraging, one younger Black student shared, "Thank you guys for making me feel welcome here. Thank you also to share my feelings at this reflection space," and a recently left note reads, "Many thanks for the warmth and wealth of knowledge in this space!" With this exhibition, we've attempted to surround the Auction Block with its own "peopled history and stories" and are grateful to have served as the stewards of this most monumental object. ■

1 “Four Types of Placemaking,” Congress of New Urbanism, accessed March 17, 2023, <https://www.cnu.org/publicsquare/four-types-placemaking>.

2 John Hennessy, “The Slave Auction Block at William and Charles,” *Mysteries & Conundrums: Exploring the Civil War-era Landscape in the Fredericksburg & Spotsylvania Region*, September 14, 2017, <https://npsfrsp.wordpress.com/2017/09/14/the-slave-auction-block-at-william-and-charles/>.

3 International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, “City of Fredericksburg: Phase One Report,” July 2018, <https://www.fredericksburgva.gov/DocumentCenter/View/11198/City-of-Fredericksburg---Phase-One-Report---Final?bidId=>; International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, “City of Fredericksburg: Phase Two Report,” December 2018, <https://www.fredericksburgva.gov/DocumentCenter/View/11856/City-of-Fredericksburg---Phase-Two-Report---Final?bidId=>; and International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, “City of Fredericksburg: Phase Three Report,” January 2019, <https://www.fredericksburgva.gov/DocumentCenter/View/14653/City-of-Fredericksburg---Phase-Three-Report---Final>.

4 City of Fredericksburg, “Slave Auction Block,” accessed March 18, 2023, <https://www.fredericksburgva.gov/1287/Slave-Auction-Block>.

5 Walter Johnson’s *Soul by Soul* was integral in understanding how enslaved people experienced auctions and created agency where possible. Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999).

6 See Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum* (Santa Cruz, California: Museum 2.0, 2010).

7 “Bench by the Road Project,” The Toni Morrison Society, accessed March 18, 2023, <https://www.tonimorrisonssociety.org/bench.html>.

8 Julia Rose, *Interpreting Difficult History at Museums and Historic Sites* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).

9 David Caprara, “The ‘slave block’ in a town in Virginia: should it stay or should it go?” *The Guardian*, September 1, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/sep/01/slave-block-fredericksburg-virginia>.

10 Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 68.



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