

SHOCKOE BOTTOM AFRICAN BURIAL GROUND MEMORIAL

A SHOCKOE PROJECT SITE



PROJECT OVERVIEW

18 SEPTEMBER 2025 | UDC CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

BASKERVILL

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

SHOCKOE BOTTOM AFRICAN BURIAL GROUND

BACKGROUND

The design for the African Burial Ground Memorial comes out of decades of work by the Richmond community, including the Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project of the Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality, the Elegba Folklore Society, and the Richmond Slave Trail Commission. The Shockoe Bottom African Burial Ground, Richmond’s first municipal African cemetery, was virtually erased from public memory until local historian Elizabeth Kambourian georeferenced its approximate location in the 1990s, likely under I-95 and a parking lot. After the Department of Historic Resources corroborated its presence in 2008, the City of Richmond acquired the adjacent land in 2011 and removed the asphalt, creating the grassy site we know today. While the exact extent of the burial ground is unknown, historians believe most, if not all, of the cemetery is located under I-95. The African Burial Ground Memorial is situated more than 50 feet from the interstate, ensuring that the built features of the memorial maintain a conservative buffer from what is the furthest likely extent of the historic cemetery.

PROJECT PURPOSE

One component of the masterplan in Shockoe Valley, the African Burial Ground Memorial carves into the earth a dedicated tribute space to the cemetery. The memorial literally takes back the land that was, for too long, cast aside, desecrated, and erased. It is adjacent to an unprogrammed wooded clearing, reminiscent of the clandestine gathering places that enslaved people created for themselves for communal solace and spiritual expression, dubbed “hush arbors.” The memorial embraces the visitor with the sounds of flowing water and a permanent and dedicated intimate space for reflection and refuge. Upon entry, one feels as though they are descending into a reflecting pool, becoming soothed by the basin of water. This experience is grounded by a wall that memorializes the stories of enslaved people who may be interred in the Burial Ground, literally carving into stone their legacies

of resistance, strength, and resilience. Upon descent, a place of refuge provides visitors with space to just sit with it all and let the sounds of a waterfall wall drown out the buzz of the campus beyond. Under the freckled light of a tree canopy, bronze niches offer anyone who wishes to a place to leave offerings and tokens of their faith and remembrance. Building upon the work of all those who worked to uncover this place, these offering walls create a permanent place for visitors to continue their pilgrimage to the Burial Ground, ensuring that their work, and the legacy of all those who came before them, is never forgotten.



Mural by UnTold RVA at the Shockoe Bottom African Burial Ground, taken during the annual Gabriel Gathering hosted by the Virginia Defenders for Freedom Justice, and Equality on Oct 11, 2022. Photo Credit: James H. Wallace/Richmond Times Dispatch

HISTORIC CONTEXT

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SHOCKOE BOTTOM AFRICAN BURIAL GROUND

RICHMOND’S FIRST MUNICIPAL AFRICAN CEMETERY

Plan of the City of Richmond by Richard Young, 1809.
Source: Library of Virginia

THE AFRICAN BURIAL GROUND

The African Burial Ground, known historically as the “Burial Ground for Negroes”, or as the Shockoe Bottom African Burial Ground, is the older of two municipal burial grounds established for the interment of free people of color and the enslaved in the city of Richmond, Virginia. To this day, the total number souls interred in that place, as well as the specific location of burials is unknown.

The city of Richmond purchased the two parcels of land on which it would establish its municipal burying grounds in 1799.¹ A 28 1/2 acre parcel was acquired on the northern end of Shockoe Hill, and a much smaller parcel in Shockoe Valley. The parcel on Shockoe Hill was purchased for the purpose of becoming the white burying ground (along with other purposes). The parcel in Shockoe Valley was intended for Black burials. The Burial Ground for Negroes is the name by which The African Burial Ground appeared on the 1809 Plan of the City of Richmond by Richard Young.² Also appearing on the 1809 Young map is the location of a powder magazine, the site that would become the city gallows after 1804.

In recent times, The African Burial Ground has become associated with Gabriel’s Rebellion as the location where Gabriel and 25 of his followers were publicly hanged at the city gallows. Though further research suggests that these executions may have taken place at a different location, the site has become a proxy site of sacredness, used by the community to remember and celebrate Gabriel and his rebellion.³ For the past

20 years, The Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project and the Defenders of Freedom, Justice & Equality celebrates the Annual Gabriel Gathering on the African Burial Ground honoring Gabriel and all those who have given their lives for the cause of freedom.

The parcel on which The African Burial Ground was established, was on or close to the banks of the Shockoe Creek. Its location was poorly suited for a burial ground. Each hard rain caused disruption, washing bodies into the creek.⁴ Upon the opening of two new burial grounds on Shockoe Hill, The African Burial Ground (old Burial Ground for Negroes) was closed to new burials, and the site immediately repurposed by the city.

It was not until the Elegba Folklore Society held its Juneteenth, A Freedom Celebration event in 2002 that the then asphalt covered site was first publicly acknowledged as the Shockoe Bottom African Burial Ground. Today, it is believed that large portions of the historic African Burial Ground are under I-95.

- 1. Smith, Ryan K. “African Burial Ground”. Richmond Cemeteries.
- 2. Young, Richard, 1809 Plan of the City of Richmond, Library of Virginia
- 3. Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project, “Shockoe Bottom African Burial Ground”
- 4. McPherson, Christopher, A Short History of the Life of Christopher McPherson, Alias Pherson, Son of Christ, King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Containing a Collection of Certificates, Letters, &c. Written by Himself. Lynchburg, VA: Christopher McPherson Smith. Printed at The Virginian Job Office, 1855.



Historian Christy Coleman sits looking at the current commemorative space for The African Burial Ground, 2023.
Photo credit: Ryan David

COMMUNITY VISION

ENGAGEMENT AND PROPOSALS

Since the creation of the Richmond Slave Trail Commission, which was tasked with preserving and presenting the history of slavery in Richmond, the community's involvement in developing and telling this history and story has been powerful. Below is a timeline of many of the masterplans, proposals, workshops, and engagement work that have engaged with the site or this story.

○ 2010

MASTERPLAN PROPOSAL

Stockton Clay Architects

○ 2013

BASEBALL STADIUM PROPOSALS

○ 2014

MASTERPLAN PROPOSAL

BAM Architects

○ 2015

A COMMUNITY PROPOSAL FOR SHOCKOE BOTTOM

Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality

○ NOVEMBER 2015

RICHMOND SPEAKS ABOUT LUMPKIN'S JAIL SITE

Richmond Speaks

○ 2016

A COMMUNITY PROPOSAL FOR SHOCKOE BOTTOM MEMORIAL PARK

The Center for Design Engagement

○ 2017 - 2018

LUMPKIN'S SLAVE JAIL/DEVIL'S HALF ACRE PROJECT

SmithGroup

○ 2019

RICHMOND NATIONAL SLAVERY MUSEUM AT THE LUMPKIN'S SLAVE JAIL SITE

SmithGroup

○ MARCH 2023

ORIENTATION AND INTERPRETATION WORKSHOP

Shockoe Project Team

○ MAY 2023

CURATORIAL WORKSHOP

Shockoe Project Team

○ OCTOBER 2023

[SHOCKOE SMALL AREA PLAN](#)

City of Richmond

○ FEBRUARY 2024

[SHOCKOE PROJECT MASTER PLAN](#)

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What would you like to see in Shockoe Bottom? a sampling of answers from March-April 2015

“Must have: A burial ground memorial”

“Sensitive archaeology that’s not bodies.”

“Tell the stories of the complex lives of enslaved men and women ”

“Space for meditation, prayer, reflection”

“Site of conscience”

“often a temptation to jump to the redemptive, reconciliation, but needs to be powerful explanation, not watered down.”

“Preserve burial ground w/memorial park”

“maintaining sacred site”

“peaceful place, place of dedication (or meditation)”

“A spiritual journey needs to be anchored in a period”

“Don’t make it sterile – make it come alive.”

“Build on what Richmond has going for it – history, art.”

“A story of endurance as well as victimization.”

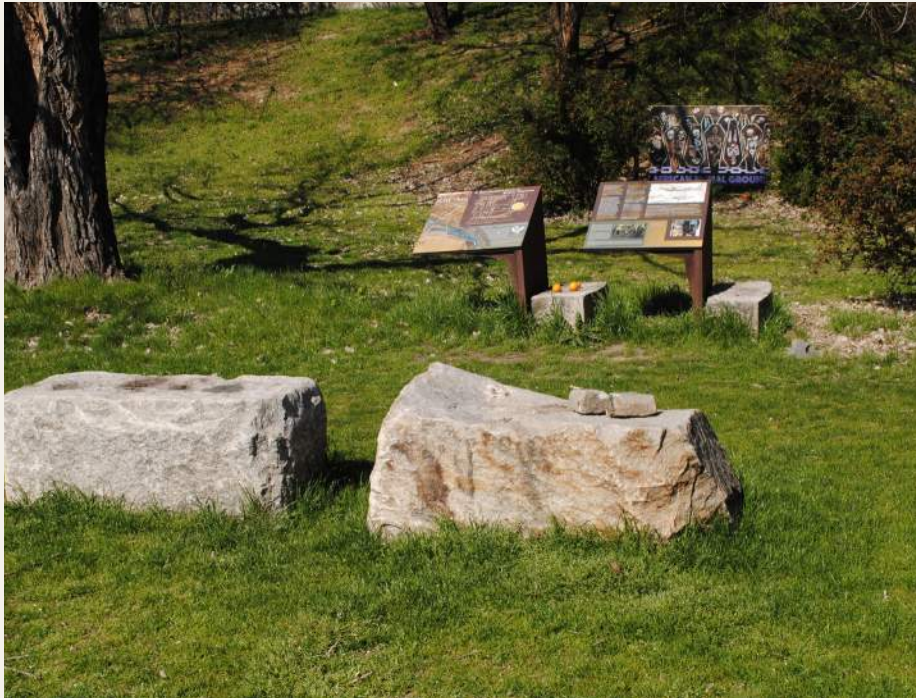
“A space where Black people can grow spiritually and economically. A reversal of what was there.”

From the engagement for A Community Proposal for Shockoe Bottom by the Defenders for Freedom, Justice, and Equality

EXISTING CONDITIONS

SITE PHOTOS

THE SITE TODAY



SITE PLAN

EXISTING

I-95

I-95

N I6TH ST

MAIN STREET
STATION

GRACE ST

E BROAD ST

OLIVER HILL WAY

BASKERVILL

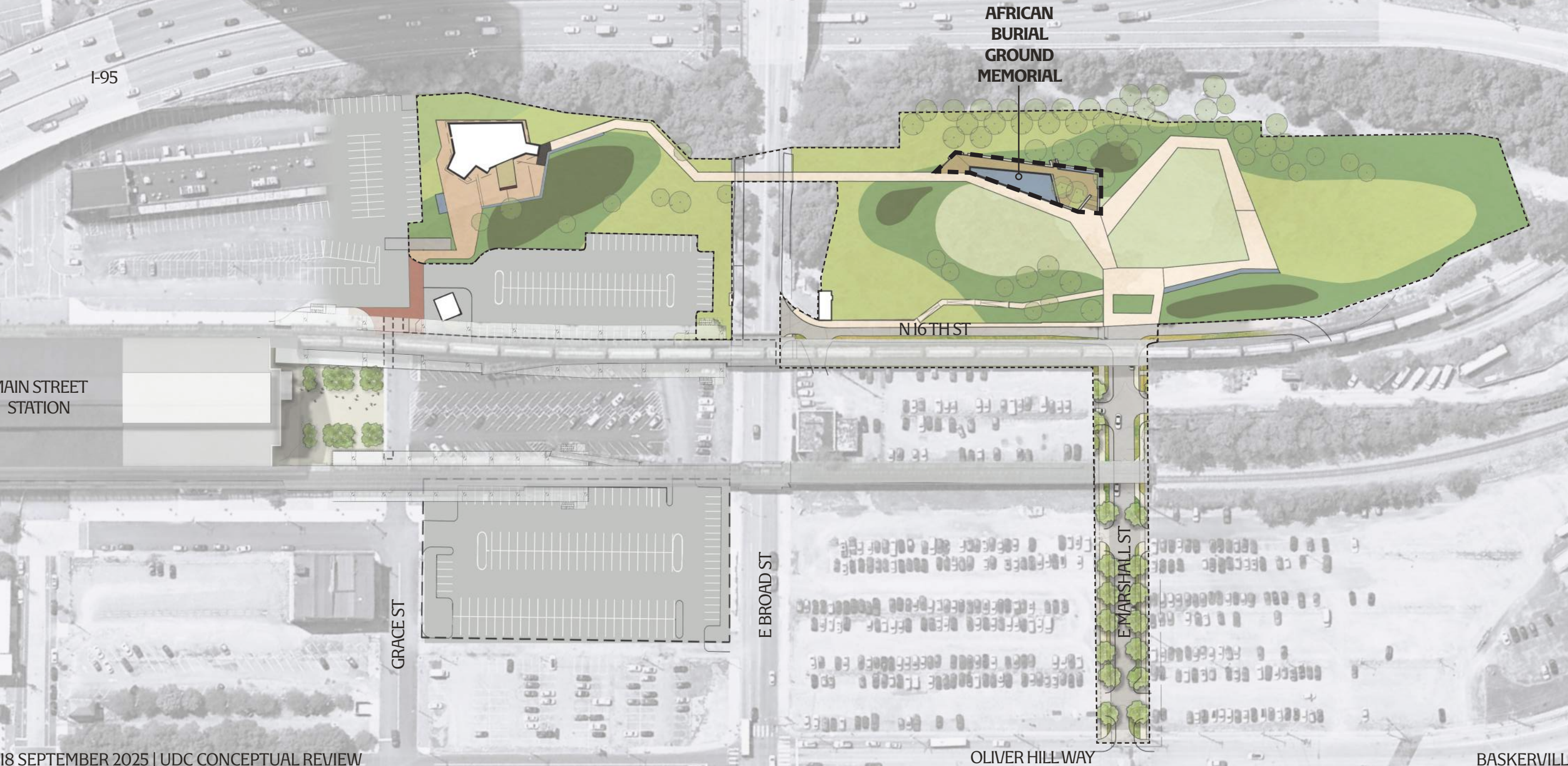
PROPOSED DESIGN

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SITE PLAN

NEXT PHASES



SITE PLAN

FULL SITE



HISTORIC ALIGNMENTS

- | | |
|------------------|------------------|
| 1809 YOUNG MAP | 1877 BEERS MAP |
| 1835 BATES MAP | 1905 SANBORN MAP |
| 1856 ELLYSON MAP | 1925 SANBORN MAP |

AFRICAN BURYING GROUND
EXACT LOCATION UNKNOWN

LUMPKIN'S
SLAVE JAIL
ARCHAEOLOGY

SHOCKOE CREEK ALIGNMENTS

N 16TH ST

MAIN STREET
STATION

GRACE ST

E BROAD ST

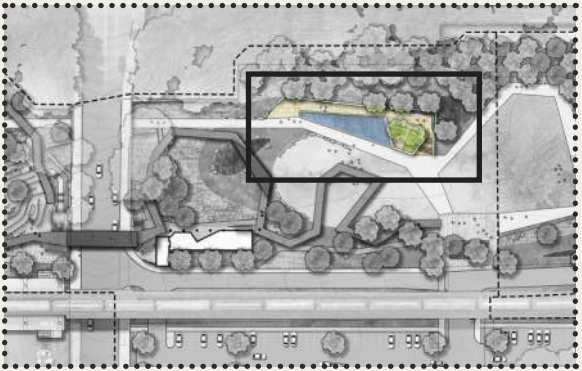
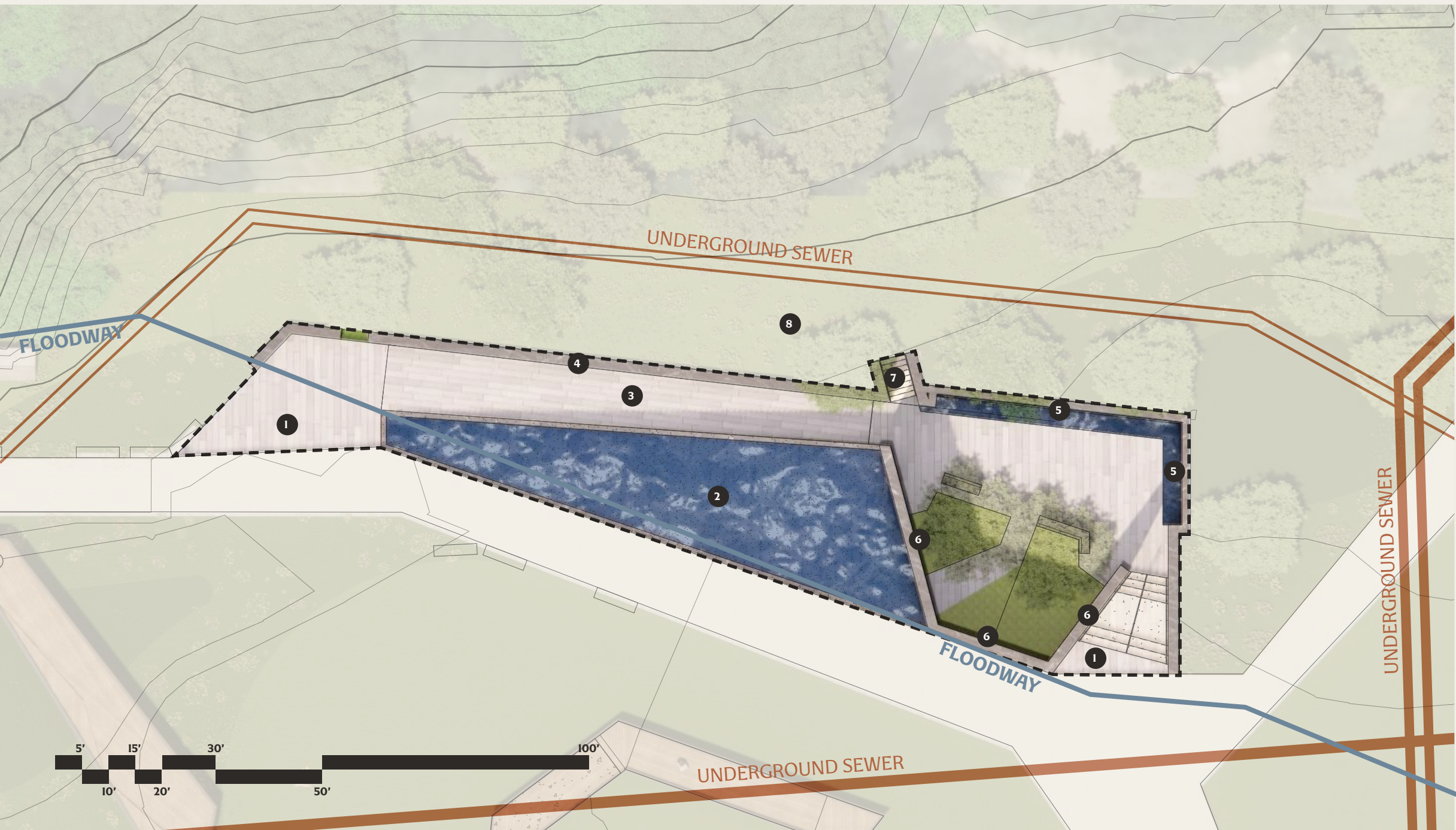
E MARSHALL ST

OLIVER HILL WAY

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ENLARGED SITE PLAN

PROPOSED



- 1 ENTRY POINTS
- 2 REFLECTION POOL
- 3 ADA ACCESSIBLE RAMP
- 4 STORY WALL
- 5 WATER WALL
- 6 OFFERING WALL
- 7 STAIRS TO “HUSH ARBOR”
- 8 HUSH ARBOR-INSPIRED SPACE

ENTRY DESCENT



BOTTOM OF RAMP



FACING WATER WALL



APPROACH FROM MARSHALL ST ENTRY



FUNDING AND SCHEDULE

FUNDING AND SCHEDULE

AFRICAN BURIAL GROUND MEMORIAL

The African Burial Ground Memorial is supported by allocated funding from the City of Richmond and the Commonwealth of Virginia.

With construction of the Shockoe Institute set to finish in 2026, and the design development of Lumpkin's Slave Jail Pavilion underway, the African Burial Ground Memorial is poised to be the next phase of The Shockoe Project.



