

CHARLOTTESVILLE HISTORIC RESOURCES COMMITTEE

POSITION STATEMENT: CSEM Auction Block Proposal

Submitted: September 17, 2026 Revised: September 21, 2026

Below is HRC's response to City Council's request for comments regarding the Court Square Enslavement Memorial (CSEM) proposal. This position statement addresses CSEM's request that the City install in the public right-of-way adjacent to Number Nothing a marker to memorialize the site of a stone auction block dedicated to the sales of enslaved persons between ca. 1820 and 1865. On the marker, CSEM proposes the following text (See Appendix C, Image 1):

*Auction Block of Enslaved Persons
Early 1800s – 1865
Removed 1920s*

POSITION STATEMENT

Position On CSEM Plaque Proposal:

HRC concurs with the view that the brutal reality of sales of enslaved people in Charlottesville and Albemarle County must be kept alive in the collective memory. HRC is committed to fully, accurately, and formally disseminating the terrible legacy of Charlottesville's slave trade. We note, however, that the current CSEM proposal is not an historically accurate means to this end and may serve to limit the broader story of enslavement at Court Square. While HRC commends the wider intentions advocated by CSEM, we feel that the current proposal placed before Council would put forth inaccurate historical information.

Position On Accuracy:

No credible evidence has been identified or provided to support the concept that a dedicated slave auction block existed within the Courthouse Square vicinity.

The apparent theory that an auction block ever existed began with circumstantial second-hand accounts compiled by Mary Rawlings in her 1942 book. No first-hand primary resource accounts have been identified that mention the presence of a slave auction block. Refer to Appendix B.

Extensive research shows that enslaved individuals were sold in several locations including the Courthouse door and steps, neighborhood taverns, and private homes. No contemporaneous firsthand accounts have been found of enslaved individuals being sold on a platform or block of any kind specifically dedicated to this purpose. This finding led to the 2025 installation of a State historical marker noting that auctions occurred in several locations *throughout* Court Square.

Basis for Position:

This position is based on research undertaken by several professional and volunteer historians over the last quarter of a century. Prior to creating this statement, the HRC reviewed auction block commemoration efforts dating from the 1940s to the present day. HRC also reviewed original source material including newspaper articles and advertisements, oral histories, books, reports, and other primary and secondary source materials.

QUESTIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

HRC offers the following questions for City Council to ask of CSEM to help clarify CSEM's goals:

- Why is this site singularly more important for memorialization as an historic venue for the sale of enslaved people than any other location within Court Square?
- Do you have concerns with the newly-placed [2025 Court Square historic marker](#) that currently tells the story of sales of enslaved people?
- Are the groups and individuals endorsing your auction block plaque proposal aware that the proposed text is not historically accurate?
- Do you have new academically-researched and source-supported information that specifically notes the verified presence of an auction block at your proposed plaque location?

HRC offers the following considerations to City Council to aid in resolving the concerns brought forth by CSEM related to their auction block plaque proposal:

- Contact local Descendant communities directly to determine their organization-wide response to the proposal
- Consider involving the [International Coalition of Sites of Conscience](#) for assistance in mediating project goals and concerns
- Consider relocating the 2025 "Slavery in Court Square" Historic Marker to a more prominent location (noting that this would likely be on County-owned property at the courthouse)
- Involve the City's Parks and Recreation Department as a stakeholder given recent completion of their [Master Plan](#) which incorporates improvement options for Court Square such as interpretive signage and art
 - Please see Section 7.6 Court Square Grounds (PDF page 113)

APPENDICES

[Appendix A](#): refer to the letter sent by James Freas to Council on January 7, 2025 highlighting HRC's previous position on this issue and that this position has not changed.

[Appendix B](#): refer to the Summary History of Auction Block References for an understanding of how unsubstantiated claims about an auction block carried forward from the 1940s.

[Appendix C](#): refer here for supporting images.

[Appendix D](#): refer to the Summary of Auction Block Memorialization Efforts for a chronological understanding of auction block reinstallation efforts through the present day.

[Appendix E](#): refer here for additional readings and resources.

APPENDIX A: January 7th, 2025 Neighborhood Development Services Letter

From: Freas, James <freasj@charlottesville.gov>
Sent: Tuesday, January 7, 2025 1:29 PM
To: Council <Council@charlottesville.gov>
Cc: Freeman Hobs Allan <freemanhobs@gmail.com>

Subject: Court Square Historical Marker Request

Councilors,

For several years the City has discussed ways to appropriately interpret and present the legacy of slavery in early Charlottesville, particularly at Court Square. In February, in coordination with the Virginia Department of Historic Resources, the City's Historic Resources Committee (HRC) will install at Court Square Park a state historical marker with the following text:

Sales of Enslaved People in Court Square

Between 1762 and 1865, auctioneers sold enslaved men, women, and children at various locations in Court Square: outside taverns, at the Jefferson Hotel, at the "Number Nothing" building, in front of the Albemarle Co. Courthouse (where sales were then recorded), and, according to tradition, from a tree stump. After Thomas Jefferson's death, 33 enslaved people from his Monticello estate were auctioned at the Eagle Hotel in Jan. 1829 to satisfy his debts. Enslaved Charlottesville residents Fountain Hughes and Maria Perkins recalled Court Day sales as dreaded occasions that separated Black families. Such sales were frequent in Virginia, where the domestic slave trade was central to the economy.

Additionally, in June 2024 the HRC distributed an updated Downtown Walking Tour Map, which discusses the legacy of slavery, specifically the buying and selling of enslaved persons at several locations within Court Square. In 2023, the City supported the archeological investigation at the Swan Tavern site, which revealed artifacts associated with 18th and early 19th century African Americans, most likely enslaved individuals.

Council has received a request that the City install in the sidewalk near Number Nothing, in Court Square, "a post containing a corrected gray slate marker on the city's curbside corner [that] should read: Traditional Site of Slave Auction Block."

In repeated e-mails and at two meetings in 2024, this individual also presented this request to the HRC. The committee declined to endorse the request, stating:

1. The committee continues to honor a 2020 request from descendants of enslaved individuals that no temporary or permanent plaque/marker be considered until there is a broader discussion with descendant community. (In response to the February 2020 theft of the bronze plaque from the sidewalk at Number Nothing, the HRC had proposed a temporary sign. See HRC's Feb. 17, 2020, letter to Council.)
2. No provenance or primary sources corroborate anecdotal reports of a dedicated auction block.
3. Primary sources show auctions occurred at multiple sites in Court Square.

The recommendation of staff and the HRC at this time is that further interpretation and presentation, and possibly memorialization, of the legacy of slavery in early Charlottesville be incorporated into the planning/design work being considered for the Court Square Park. This recommendation should not be construed as limiting a potential recognition to the park space, only that the park planning process offers the opportunity to publicly consider the nature of the recognition. Consistent with the 2016 recommendations of the Blue Ribbon Commission on Race, Memorials and Public Spaces, the HRC recommends that process include active engagement with the community of people in the area who are descendants of enslaved persons. If you have any further questions on this topic, I would be happy to discuss.

Best,
James
James Freas, AICP (he/him)
Deputy City Manager for Operations
City of Charlottesville
City Hall
610 East Market Street
Charlottesville, VA 22902

APPENDIX B: Summary History of Auction Block References

Summary: There is no credible evidence that a dedicated "slave auction block" ever existed in the vicinity of Court Square.

The view that there was a slave auction block relies on the writings of Mary Rawlings, the leading local historian of the mid-20th century and, in 1940, a co-founder of the Albemarle Historical Society. Her scholarship and personal efforts earned Rawlings recognition from the society as an "honorary lifetime president" in 1950. Among her books was an annotated reprint of [*Early Charlottesville: Recollections of James Alexander \(1828-1874\)*](#). A footnote on page 19 in the book outlines the only mention that a slave auction block may ever have existed. In that 1942 publication Rawlings quoted Homan W. Walsh:

At some later period, traditions of the slave trade gathered about this house [Number Nothing]. Some hold that the lot was used for this purpose. Mr. Homan W. Walsh, whose offices—formerly those of Mr. Dan Harmon—occupied the southern half, informs us: "I have, of course, heard the building was a slave auction room...I have never heard of a sign on the wall relating to its use as a slave market. When I commenced practicing law in Mr. Harmon's office in 1906 and for several years afterward, there was at the side of the office at the curb a large stone, perhaps 18 inches wide and 30 inches long, which it was said was the auction block for selling enslaved people...It was taken away years ago by some employees of the city, when cleaning the streets or paving this section.

Stones of these dimensions were found throughout Charlottesville and likely served as carriage or horse mounting blocks. [See *Images #3 and #4 in Appendix C*]. It could be that Mr. Walsh was looking directly outside his window or perhaps he was looking across the street to the mounting block located at the former Colonial Hotel (now 300 Court Square) and shown in Image #3. While no evidence exists that these blocks were not also used as auction sites, no evidence suggests that they were used as anything other than mounting blocks.

In a subsequent book published in 1958, [*Historical Guide to Old Charlottesville*](#), Rawlings expanded on her earlier research:

Number Nothing...is the original house on this lot. It was built in 1820...Traditions of the slave trade cluster here. Until some forty years ago there was on its Southern side, at the curb, a large stone, some eighteen inches high, by fifteen inches wide, and thirty long, which was known as the slave block. Here the village auctioneers long functioned, and doubtless when slaves were brought in, their dealers made use of these facilities. A fragment of an old sign may still be deciphered on this wall: "...and Bros. Auction Rooms." The stone was unintentionally removed during recent street repairs.

Rawlings' findings, published about 75 years after the last local slave auction, relies on what someone recalls being told decades earlier. Her confident assertion that "doubtless when slaves were brought in, their dealers made use of these facilities" goes far beyond the hearsay evidence she presents. Within the quoted references, note also the use of circumstantial words "heard" and "it was said" as indication that Rawlings had not thoroughly researched her claims.

The only other reference to a slave auction block is found in a recent book *Charlottesville: An American Story* by Deborah Baker. This book offers a different perspective. A City resident, Mary Carey, is quoted at age 70 as saying, "The actual slave auction block was still in Court Square."

That recollection suggests the slave auction block was still in place in the 1950s or later but photographs from that era and earlier show no such block and no other mention has been found.

Rawlings' reference to a "fragment of an old sign" points to a still-visible trace of a painted sign on Number Nothing's south face that reads "and Bros. Auction Rooms." We know little about Benson and Brothers' auction office that occupied at least part of Number Nothing. The firm published an advertisement for a slave auction to be held on January 2, 1865. A third advertisement promoted a sale scheduled for March 6, 1865, but it is unlikely that the sale took place, given that Charlottesville was occupied by U.S. Cavalry under Maj. Gen. Philip Sheridan at the time.

Other newspaper advertisements state that slave auctions were held at various sites throughout the area including private homes, taverns, and the courthouse door. The historical record indicates transactions at locations throughout Court Square, for example: *at the Central Hotel* (1820); *at the front door of the Court house* (1822); *before the door of the Swan Tavern* (1824); *before the Courthouse door* (1827); *before the door of the Eagle Tavern* (1828); *before the door of Mr. Garnett's tavern* (1828); *in front of the Court House door* (1828); *at the corner between the Central Hotel and Court House square* (1829); *in front of the Court House* (1846); *at the Court House* (1858); *H. Benson & Bro.'s* (1862); and *on the Public Square* (1865).

No advertisements have been found that tout the services of a slave trader or an auctioneer who specialized in the sale of human beings and who may have used an auction block. Regarding Number Nothing and its association with the slave trade, Number Nothing was built circa 1820 as a mercantile building, almost 61 years after the Town of Charlottesville was established and the Albemarle County Court House was relocated there from Scottsville. It is not known when H. Benson & Brothers occupied the building, nor how the building was used prior to that. A very cursory research of slave auctions advertised in newspapers dating from 1820 through 1865 verify that at least 143 sales events of enslaved people occurred throughout Albemarle County and the (then) Town of Charlottesville. Of these records, only three have been found that advertise an auction at Benson & Brothers auction house (i.e. Number Nothing) with the earliest dating to December 16, 1862. Additionally, of the 143 ads, 72 were for sales outside of Town and of those inside Town and Court Square, 35 (or approximately 57%) took place at the Courthouse.

In addition to advertisements for slave auctions held in various locations, more recent testimony does not support the presence of a dedicated slave auction block. In 1949, when he was 101 years old, former slave Fountain Hughes told an interviewer of "an auction bench, an' they'd put you on, up on the bench an' bid on you jus' same as you bidding on cattle." A bench is not, obviously, a dedicated auction block. In 1999, Rebecca Fuller McGuinness, then 106 years old, recalled a tree stump in front of the courthouse. "My grandmother told me that they used to sell slaves on that tree stump," she told a newspaper interviewer.

In the 1950s, the historical society, seeking to promote tourism and historical knowledge, attached to several Court Square buildings simple slate markers with white painted lettering. Some of these remain visible, and one was attached to Number Nothing that indicated the location of a slave auction block. The information on that sign has led to the present discussion.

The HRC's previous engagement with this issue resulted in the installation in 2025 of a new State historical marker. Located near the former location of the Stonewall Jackson statue, that sign reads:

Sales of Enslaved People in Court Square

Between 1762 and 1865, auctioneers sold enslaved men, women, and children at various locations in Court Square: outside taverns, at the Jefferson Hotel, at the "Number Nothing" building, in front of the Albemarle County Courthouse (where sales were then recorded), and, according to tradition, from a tree stump. After Thomas Jefferson's death, 33 enslaved people from his Monticello estate were auctioned at the Eagle Hotel in January 1829 to satisfy his debts. Enslaved Charlottesville residents Fountain Hughes and Maria Perkins recalled Court Day sales as dreaded occasions that separated Black families. Such sales were frequent in Virginia, where the domestic slave trade was central to the economy.

Though not directly related, located on Courthouse grounds is another relatively new two-sided marker. Erected through the efforts of the Equal Justice Initiative, the sign tells the story of John Henry James, a local resident lynched by an angry mob in western Albemarle County. The sign's other side, titled "Lynching in America," explains the widespread use of lynching as a terror tactic.

Based on this extensive research, with complete confidence, the HRC can state there is no basis for claims that—within Court Square or anywhere within the Town of Charlottesville (which became a City in 1888)—there was a single location dedicated to the sale of enslaved individuals.

APPENDIX C: Related Images

Image 1: Current CSEM Plaque Proposal



Image 2: Ex. Court Square Marker Installed 2025



Image #3: Ca. 1915 Mounting Block Once Located in Front of the Colonial Hotel (300 Court Square)



Rufus W. Holsinger. Colonial Hotel Charlottesville.
<https://search.lib.virginia.edu/items/uva-lib:1043135>

University of Virginia Library - search.lib.virginia.edu

Under 17USC, Section 107, this single copy was produced for the purposes of private study, scholarship, or research.
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Image #4: Contemporary Advertisement for Recycled Mounting Blocks in Similar Dimensions as the stone shown in Image #3 and described in Rawlings' book

HOW IT MAY HAVE LOOKED
Circa Late 1800s – Early 1900s

Carriage Steps provided an easier way to mount into carriages and early automobiles.

AS IT LOOKS TODAY

CLEANED UP MOCK UP

HOW IT WAS USED

ABOUT CARRIAGE STEPS

- Common in the late 1800s to early 1900s
- Placed at the curb to help passengers step into high vehicles
- Made of limestone or concrete
- Surviving examples are rare
- This one appears to be unusually large and well preserved
- The name may be the owner, builder, or stone company

TOP VIEW

CARRIAGE STEPS
A GLIMPSE INTO THE PAST

Image #5a: 1962 Daily Progress article noting the installation of the original gray slate markers throughout the City as a project of the Albemarle Historical Society



Image #5b: 1962 Daily Progress article noting the installation of the original gray slate markers throughout the City as a project of the Albemarle Historical Society

Society Installing Plaques On City's Historical Buildings

A score of markers on historic buildings and sites in the Court Square area are being put up by the Albemarle Historical Society in connection with Charlottesville's 200th Anniversary celebration.

The slate plaques were attached to buildings yesterday, and street markers giving the original name of streets in the area are scheduled to go up next week.

Buildings marked are the Albemarle County Court House, the rear of which was constructed in 1803; the Albemarle office building, 1939; and the town hall, built in 1851 and now the Park View apartments.

The row of buildings which extends from East Jefferson Street (the auto license bureau) down onto East Sixth Street is marked as site of a storehouse, the first public library, and a watchmakers shop, all from the early 1800's.

The Monticello Hotel annex was the site of the Eagle Tavern until

1863; the hotel site once housed the first town post office and shops.

The Red Land Club building is on the site of the Swan Tavern, built after 1773. "Number nothing" Court Square lacked a number because it was a vacant lot, which later housed a mercantile business.

Also to be marked will be Christ Church, built on the site

of the town's First (Episcopal) Church, constructed in 1826; and several residences.

Eight streets will be marked with their original names: Court Street, now East Fifth; School Street, East Third; Union Street, East Fourth; Church Street, East Second; Green Street, First; Hill Street, West Second; Maiden Lane, now High Street; and County Road, the extension of Jefferson Street outside of the Court Square area.

Miss Evelina Magruder is chairman of the historic markers committee of the Albemarle Historical Society, assisted by Charles Smith and Mrs. J. Rawlings Thompson.

Slates for the building markers were contributed by City Building Inspector C. Frank Muse; and the work on the plaques was contributed by George Lex, who operates an advertising business at Shadwell.

Firemen Called Out on 2 Alarms

Firemen answered two calls yesterday and today — two beds on fire.

At 10:19 last night a bed was on fire at 319 Sixth St. SE in a house occupied by Ed Jett. At 3:33 this morning another bed was on fire at 228 14th St. in a house occupied by Thomas Carver. No injuries were reported and damage was slight, firemen said.

WINA Appoints

Image #6: Granite Wall Plaque installed by HRC in 2003.



Image #7: In-ground Bronze Plaque Installed by City of Charlottesville in 2009 and Removed by Freeman Allan



APPENDIX D: Summary Auction Block Memorialization Efforts

<u>Date/period</u>	<u>Event</u>
1762–1865	Slave sales take place in Court Square. The City of Charlottesville's historical marker states that enslaved men, women, and children were sold at multiple locations around the square, including outside taverns, at the courthouse, at the Jefferson Hotel, at Number Nothing, and—according to tradition—from a tree stump.
January 1, 1829	33 enslaved people from Thomas Jefferson's Monticello estate were auctioned at the Eagle Hotel following Jefferson's death, to help satisfy his debts. This is one of the best-documented slave auctions connected with Court Square.
1850s–1860s	Benson & Bro's Auction operated from the Number Nothing building. Newspaper advertisements show the firm dealing in both goods and enslaved people although sales led by Benson & Bro's did not always occur at their building.
1865	The legal slave trade ends in Charlottesville, Virginia.
1942	First documented reference to an auction block possibly existing at Number Nothing appears in Albemarle County Historical Society's 1942 re-print of " <i>Early Charlottesville: Recollections of James Alexander 1828-1874</i> " originally published in 1874 and edited by Mary Rawlings. Annotations added in the reprint include circumstantial mention of a stone "slave block" at Number Nothing and claims its association with the "...Benson and Bros. Auction Rooms" sign on the building. Refer to Appendix B for historical references.
1962	Albemarle Historical Society places hand-lettered slate-shingle plaques denoting historical sites, including a plaque at Number Nothing denoting the location of a slave auction block (See Images #5a and #5b). This plaque is removed at an unknown time.
1963	ACHS circulates a second reprint of an annotated version of Alexander's <i>Recollections</i> book. The reprint again includes the 1942 annotation referring to the auction block. Subsequent citations in other documents and publications referencing an auction block appear to point back to the 1942 annotation.
2002	HRC and ACHS publish and circulate the <i>Historic Charlottesville Tour Book</i> which notes that auction of enslaved persons occurred in Court Square. City of
2003	Coinciding with the dedication of street and sidewalk improvements in Court Square, the HRC installed granite wall plaques at five locations that provided information about the history of Court Square. The plaque at Number Nothing referred to the building's connection to the slave trade. At some point after the improvements were completed, the HRC was notified that the slate shingle marker on the south wall of Number Nothing had been removed, when or by whom is unknown.

<u>Date/period</u>	<u>Event</u>
2009	HRC installs in the sidewalk near the west wall of Number Nothing a bronze plaque denoting location of “Slave Auction Block.” This was not intended to mark a precise location only to indicate a block was reported near Number Nothing. Because the then-owner of Number Nothing did not permit installation of a plaque onto the building a decision was made to install it in the sidewalk.
2011	HRC and ACHS print and circulate the <i>Historic Charlottesville Tour Map</i> which notes that auction of enslaved persons occurred in Court Square.
2016	Charlottesville’s Blue Ribbon Commission on Race, Memorials and Public Spaces (BRC) discusses the Number Nothing site and the former stone block. The Commission recommends more extensive interpretation of the slave trade and its impact on Charlottesville.
February 6, 2020	Richard “Freeman” Allan, III illegally removes from the sidewalk at Number Nothing the 2009 bronze plaque and attempts to also remove the granite marker installed on the Number Nothing wall in 2003. The dislodged granite marker is later removed by the building owner and given to NDS staff. The bronze plaque is later recovered and CPD returns the plaque to NDS staff.
February 25, 2020	City Council endorsed an HRC proposal to install at the sidewalk near Number Nothing a temporary marker acknowledging the site’s connection to the slave trade. Not intended as a permanent marker or memorial the feature is meant only to provide interpretation while the City considers a longer-term response to the recommendations of the Blue Ribbon Commission.
March 8, 2020	At an HRC subcommittee meeting members of the descendant community request that the HRC not install any markers at Number Nothing—temporary or permanent—until there is dialogue with the descendant community. Respecting this request, the HRC does not install the previously endorsed temporary marker. After this request, subsequent research by the HRC revealed that except for Homan Walsh’s account in 1942, no historic documentation existed supporting the claim of a dedicated slave auction block located at Number Nothing. Further research revealed that sale of enslaved individuals occurred at locations throughout Court Square, with the majority occurring at the Court House and very few auctions associated with Number Nothing.
October 2023	Charlottesville’s Historic Resources Committee applies to the Virginia Department of Historic Resources for a new state historical marker addressing slave sales throughout Court Square.
March 3, 2025	Charlottesville unveils a new state historical marker titled “Sales of Enslaved People in Court Square.” Rather than identifying Number Nothing as the sole auction site, the marker explains that sales occurred at several locations throughout Court Square between 1762 and 1865.

<u>Date/period</u>	<u>Event</u>
November 2025	Deputy City Manager James Freas directs CSEM to consult with Descendant community and Parks & Recreation Department. Freas directs CSEM to ask City Council for a vote.
May 2026	Council encourages CSEM to hold off on their request until the new Arts Commission is formed
June 2026	CSEM asks Council to vote on their plaque proposal by the end of July 2026

APPENDIX E: Additional Resources

Charlottesville Blue Ribbon Commission on Race, Memorials, and Public Spaces (December 19, 2016), Report to City Council by Historic Resources Committee

Charlottesville City Council Agenda for March 7, 2022 “Historic Resources Committee status report on memorialization.” See PDF page 44

https://weblink.charlottesville.org/public/0/edoc/800901/AGENDA_20220307Mar07.pdf

Contested Histories, “Slave Auction Plaque in Charlottesville, USA”, Contested Histories Case Study #215 (January 2026), Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) at the European Association of History Educators (EuroClio), retrieved from [link], CC BY 4.0.

https://contestedhistories.org/wp-content/uploads/USA_Slave-Auction-Plaque-in-Charlottesville.pdf

Court Square Walking Tour (Image of in-ground auction block memorial)

<https://www.thesemonuments.org/home/#slave-auction-block>

Cville Weekly “Why I did it:” County resident confesses to taking slave auction block”

<https://c-ville.com/why-i-did-it-county-resident-confesses-to-taking-slave-auction-block/>

NBC29 News February 6, 2020 “Slave auction markers missing from Charlottesville’s Court Square”

<https://www.29news.com/2020/02/06/slave-auction-marker-missing-charlottesvilles-court-square>

Schulman, Gayle M. “Site of Slave Block?” The Magazine of Albemarle County History, vol. 58, 2000.

https://albemarlehistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/MACH58_2000-Schulman-12212021.pdf