

A Way In

The Richmond Slave Trail will get a new, purposeful entrance

BY [HARRY KOLLATZ JR.](#)

JULY 20, 2022

A rendering of the Richmond Slave Trail entrance project, which includes patterns replicating the spaces in which enslaved people were held on ships (Image courtesy Baskervill)

While the walking paths of the Richmond Slave Trail offer grand vistas of the riverfront and downtown Richmond, the entrance is, well, a bit scruffy.

On the south bank of the James River at Manchester Docks, off Brander Street near the wastewater treatment plant, the entrance guides visitors to a walking path that includes a series of 17 well-made markers that illustrate a tragic history hidden in part by nature and the intervention of the built environment. From 1830 to 1860, the area was ground zero in the city's massive slave trading business.

Funding for improvements to the Slave Trail entrance started with the state's 2019 allocation of \$1 million. The concept went through the necessary approval stages, but it lacked a project leader. Enter Kim Chen of the city's planning and preservation division, who became a senior manager in 2020. "I've been trying to get this reinvigorated," she explains. "When someone parks, they'll have a better understanding of what's there and what they are being invited to see."

The new entrance was designed by Richmond's venerable Baskervill architectural firm. Burt Pinnock, the lead designer, describes the project as an orientation for visitors. "They're gaining a broader perspective than something that gets a whole chapter in our school-age books," he says. "Our purpose is to add meat to the bones."

An amphitheater is planned to complement guided tours and events associated with the Slave Trail. The presentation space doesn't face the riverfront. "It's not about the bucolic view," describes Pinnock, "but the undercurrent of the history behind all that."

Part of the design includes patterns replicating the space allotted to an enslaved person in a ship's hold during the Middle Passage. Pinnock drew inspiration from an installation at the Charles W. Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit. "It's eye-opening," he says, "and makes personal this sort of history that has become obscure for people who don't really think about it."

Construction is set to begin in September, with completion targeted for 2023.