

Presentation to the Alexandria City Council

February 24, 2018

Mayor Silberberg, Vice-Mayor Wilson, Members of the City Council,

My name is Chuck Ziegler, Vice-President for Advocacy and Development of the Friends of the Beatley Central Library. In recent City budgets you prudently reversed a trend that had resulted in shrinking funding for our public libraries. The FY19 budget proposed by Mr. Jinks and his staff continues this trend reversal. This was a wise decision indeed, because there is good reason for generously funding our public libraries.

To support this assertion, let's look at a little history. The Boston Public Library, opened in 1854, is usually considered the first public library, as we understand the term. Its statement of purpose includes the ideas that:

- The future of democracy is contingent on an educated citizenry;
- There's a strong correlation between the public library movement and public education; and
- Every citizen has the right of free access to community-owned resources.

These ideas remain as relevant today as they were in 1854.

Note also that this statement of purpose established the fundamental concept of governmental responsibility for the public library as a municipal institution supported by taxation, a responsibility that now rests with you.

Turning to our own time, public libraries, while not neglecting their traditional role as promoters of reading and literacy, have evolved to institutions actively involved in meeting the needs of their communities. They are trusted, stable, apolitical, and safe institutions.

Our public libraries combat "fake news" by upholding democratic ideals of privacy, freedom to access information, and the ethical use of that information. They also mitigate the effects of income inequality. The same materials, programs, and services are available to *all* our citizens, regardless of their income level. At a time when the needs of our public schools are great, our public libraries in Alexandria are clearly manifesting the strong correlation between public libraries and public education.

Let me close by urging approval of the increase proposed in the FY19 budget for Alexandria's public libraries; it is a sound investment in the public good.

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by Gary J. Carr, President, Northern Virginia Urban League Guild

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When entering the National Museum of African American History and Culture, you take an elevator to the lower level where you are introduced to the nexus of the black experience in America- the Transatlantic slave trade. Harrowing in and of itself, it takes you through the centuries of one of the most brutal epochs in human history. Millions are known to have died in the trafficking of humanity for economic gain. Slavery, though known throughout history, had taken on a much more ominous character, chattel property based on race.

As you continue through the museum, you enter a grand vestibule, greeted by a monument called the “Paradox of Liberty”, into a room documenting the Domestic Slave Trade. I would contend to you that the room could be more appropriately named “The American Slave Industry”. For when I entered that grand hall, announcing the role of “King Cotton”, there was an epiphany of sorts. Slavery was not one crime, but two. One was international, and one was domestic. One holds the world it's the defendant, and one the unique perpetrator was to the United States of America. A video as you enter the hall tells the story of how Franklin & Armfield- Slave Traders, among many others, became millionaires trafficking in human misery,

There is a building on Goree Island off the coast of Senegal. It houses what has been dubbed the “Door of No Return”, from which slaves ships engage in the transatlantic trade took kidnapped Africans to the New World, never to see home again. An equivalent to that symbolic door for domestic slavery is located right here in Alexandria, Virginia, at the Freedom House Museum on Duke Street. From that inauspicious entryway was the ruination of tens of thousand to millions of lives. It is symbolic of America’s “door of no return”

Think of all the bad things that have happened in your life, to your family, and your friends and multiply that by ten. To a slave, that was called Monday. It is hard for me to describe the perniciousness of the American slavery system. It was evil, in the deepest meaning of the word. Yet, it has been marginalized, and many fail to realize the depth and breadth of its corrosiveness on all who encountered it. We have forgotten what should be remembered, and glossed over when we should have paid attention.

How many of the original colonies was slavery legal? The answer? All of them. From that not always fully understood fact comes the magnitude of the depravation that would follow. When the transatlantic slave trade was abolished in 1808, though it would go on defacto decades longer, the forces were already set in place for the next evil of domestic slavery. As slavery was abolished in the Northern states, instead of doing the righteous thing, and freeing their slaves, they sold them to the cruelest fate imaginable, the deepest part of the South. With no consideration for familial ties or any other emotional bond, families were separated arbitrarily; leaving pain and scars so deep they never healed. Alexandria was a major conduit for this waystation to misery. The establishment at 1315 Duke Street was a major stage in the ongoing human tragedy.

If you look at the image on the wall behind you depicts early Alexandria City. Closer examination tells a story. Of the ships that were essential to the slave trade, both foreign and domestic. Of the railroad station that brought the various participants to and fro. And of the road fading into the horizon, from which so many lives were changed forever. But, also on the diagram is also the Freedom House, perhaps knowing that decades later there would be a better day.

Ten years ago the Northern Virginia Urban League came into possession of the Freedom House. We built a museum to tell this important story. Now we are poised to begin a chapter in partnership with the City, not to save the Freedom House, but to liberate it. Free the Freedom House- to free it from debt, to free it of repairs. And to free the spirits of thousands of ancestors by telling and retelling their story.