

Department of Historic Resources

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STATE HISTORICAL HIGHWAY MARKER
"POCAHONTAS ISLAND"
TO BE DEDICATED IN PETERSBURG

—Marker recognizes Petersburg's largest free African-American neighborhood on the eve of the Civil War; archaeological evidence indicates Native Americans occupied the area as early as 6500 BC—

—The marker's text is reproduced below—

RICHMOND – A state historical marker issued by the Virginia Department of Historic Resources commemorating Petersburg's Pocahontas Island neighborhood, a thriving free African American community prior to the Civil War, will be dedicated this weekend, serving as a kick-off of the city's Juneteenth Freedom Festival.

The dedication and unveiling ceremony for the marker will begin at 1:45 p.m., Sunday, June 21, at the marker's location at the intersection of Sapony and Joseph Jenkins Roberts Streets in Petersburg. The event is open to the public.

Speakers will include Kathleen Morgan, preservation planner with the City of Petersburg; Dr. Laurant Lee, of the Virginia Historical Society; Louis Malon, of Preservation Virginia; Maat Free, founder of The Beloved Unseen; and Petersburg city manager William E. Johnson III.

After the unveiling of the marker, attendees to the ceremony are invited to join a Unity Walk to kick-off the city's Juneteenth Freedom Festival.

Pocahontas Island, where the town of Pocahontas was established in 1752, became part of Petersburg in 1784. By 1860, more members of the city's large free African American community lived there than in any other neighborhood, according to the historical marker.

Residents of the community found work in nearby tobacco factories and on wharves that "fueled the bustling Appomattox River trade," the marker states. Prior to the Civil War, the community was also a likely station on the Underground Railroad because of its large free African American population and proximity to the river.

In 1993, a tornado left widespread damage to the area's historic buildings. Today the oldest standing structure in the neighborhood is the Jarratt House, built around 1819. Archaeological evidence also indicates that Native Americans occupied the area as early as 6500 BC.

Virginia's historical highway marker program, which began in 1927 with the installation of the first historical markers along U.S. Route 1, is considered the oldest such program in the nation. Currently there are more than 2,500 official state markers, most maintained by the Virginia Department of Transportation, as well as by local partners in jurisdictions outside of VDOT's authority such as Petersburg.

Text of the marker:

Pocahontas Island QA-35

The town of Pocahontas, established in 1752, became part of Petersburg in 1784. By 1860, more members of the city's large free African American community lived here than in any other neighborhood. Their work in tobacco factories and on wharves fueled the bustling Appomattox River trade. Residents likely used their access to the river to help enslaved blacks escape via the Underground Railroad. After the Civil War, Pocahontas attracted many emancipated African Americans. A tornado left widespread damage in 1993. The Jarratt House, ca. 1819, at 808-810 Logan Street, is the oldest standing structure. Archaeological evidence indicates Native American occupation of this area as early as 6500 BC.

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