

Dr. Gregg D. Kimball, Historian
7136 Shoreline Drive, Quinton, VA 23141

Dear Richmond Planning Commission Members:

I am writing to you to express my support for the Tredegar Green project and to address some of the issues raised regarding the historical record of the Tredegar Iron Works and the James River and Kanawha Canal. I hold a Ph.D. in history from the University of Virginia and authored the book *American City, Southern Place: A Cultural History of Antebellum Richmond*, published in 2000. I assisted in the restoration of the Tredegar Iron Works site while working as a curator and historian at the Valentine Richmond History Center, and I continue to consult on its history with various historical organizations. I have also been on the Program Committee of the Richmond Folk Festival since its inception, and I know something about the challenges of the current site. I would like to emphasize that I am writing in my capacity as a private and concerned citizen of the Richmond region.

I would like to address several aspects of the project. Obviously, I have an expertise in the historical questions that have been raised regarding changes to the Tredegar Iron Works site and the James River and Kanawha Canal. I have reviewed the report by Dutton and Associates commissioned by Venture Richmond; materials supplied by Oregon Hill resident Charles Pool in his presentation to the UDC, and the document entitled "James River and Kanawha Canal: Timeline and Visual Documentation Pertaining to the Proposed Tredegar Green Amphitheater" by T. Tyler Potterfield of the City's Planning and Preservation Division. Generally, my conclusions are:

- The canal tow path was roughly twelve feet wide in the late antebellum era as asserted by the Dutton report and city staff.
- The historic water level in the canal was likely in the lower range of 81-82 feet.
- The project would do no great harm to the Tredegar site.
- This project is vital to the continued success of the Richmond Folk Festival.

Beyond the more technical aspects of the historical questions, I would also like to address the importance of the project and the need for a mature civic debate.

The Antebellum Towpath and Canal Profile

Opponents have argued that the antebellum tow path for the canal in the project area was 30 feet wide based on an 1848 land plat. City staff and the Dutton study assert that the tow path was approximately 12 feet wide based on a number of sources. I agree with the interpretation of the city and the Dutton study. The evidence is overwhelming.

The 30 feet noted on the 1848 land plat is a property line or right-of-way. Land plats served primarily to delineate property, rights-of-way, and the like. In fact, the fence line indicated on this plat clearly bisects the 30 foot line as does a house, likely delineating the boundary of the tow path from the Tredegar site. Likewise, the 1865 photograph of Tredegar and Harvie's Pond reproduced on page 19 of

the Pool study and also reproduced in the city's study indicates the narrowness of the tow path. The labor's quarters along the canal in this image are 28 feet in depth (documented in the Raber archeological study, based on Mutual Assurance Society policies). It is obvious at a glance that the width of the tow path is much smaller than these structures. The documentation from images, James River and Kanawha Canal sources, and maps is consistent and unassailable: the tow path was approximately 12 feet. The 1848 plat is simply being misread.

The modern width of the tow path in the project area today is 20 to 25 feet. This reinforces the point made in both the Dutton and city studies: The canal is not a pristine structure, but one modified over the years for the benefit of the Tredegar Iron Works and the various railroads.

There are differing interpretations of the historic water level in the canal ranging from about 81 feet to 83 feet. The key sources used by opponents are suspect. These documents were created by an engineering firm (Trimble) as part of a lawsuit between the Tredegar Iron Works and the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad over water rights to the canal, which was still providing water power to the iron works in the 1930s. It was obviously in the interest of Tredegar to assert the greatest possible water volume in the canal. A C & O Railroad document of the same period asserts an existing water level in the project area that was slightly below 82 feet. Neither document is particularly definitive. As Dutton and the Potterfield correctly assert, Charles S. Morgan's *Plan of Richmond (Henrico County), Manchester & Springhill Virginia* published in 1848, is the only period reference to water level. The notations on the map state the canal is "about 81 feet above low tide." Cross section images of the exposed canal walls taken during the 2nd Street Connector construction support the conclusion that ballast was added to the towpaths to accommodate railroad construction.

Disruption of the Tredegar Site

A recently raised objection by opponents is that grading on the site will disturb other historic resources as identified in the initial archaeological report of Raber and Associates undertaken in the early 1990s for the Valentine Museum. (By the way, I collaborated in the creation of that study.) While Pool points to the Raber report as evidence of extensive archeological resources in the project area, my reading of the report is just the opposite. For example, Pool reproduces the legend to figure 9 of Raber's report (p. 40), as evidence of extensive buildings on the site in the late antebellum era. Strangely, he does not include the actual figure (map) that corresponds to the legend, which, in my analysis, shows no documented buildings in the proposed project area.

My experience with the grading that took place in preparation for the opening of the Tredegar site in the early 1990s is that the antebellum fabric of the site, certainly the most important period and the time frame identified by opponents, is well below the current grade. This conclusion was reinforced by archeological investigations of laborer's quarters that were undertaken on the site. No antebellum fabric was encountered for many feet. Certainly mitigation should be exercised during the work process as would be the standard for such a project.

The Canal Plan

One of the deep ironies of the current controversy is that the full plan articulated by supporters of re-watering the canal would do tremendous damage to historical resources on the Tredegar site and surrounding areas. The opening of the canal to Maymont may be achievable in a historically sensitive way, but the extension of the canal to the Haxall Mill Race would be destructive and is totally ahistorical. If the relatively light changes requested by Venture Richmond are considered too intrusive, the Planning Commission should here and now declare the full canal plan advocated by supporters an absolute non-starter.

Far from preserving the historical canal as it actually existed, it would require the construction of an entry point (and thus the destruction of an entire section of canal towpath and embankment) for a set of locks that never existed. Likewise, these locks would link to the Haxall Mill Race, which was never used as a transportation canal. This Disney-like intervention would require extensive excavation, most likely in the footprints of the antebellum Armory Rolling Mill and the Virginia Manufactory of Arms, founded around 1800.

As opponents have themselves noted, the canal suffered considerable damage over the course of its history because of flooding. Indeed, the high cost of maintaining the canal was a primary reason for its demise after the rise of railroads. This was the main reason that the C & O Railroad attempted to shut down the canal in the 1930s, prompting the Tredegar litigation. If the city or a private entity is serious about re-watering the canal, the time is now to commission engineering studies to assess the true costs of such a project.

A Personal Note: Brick Walls and Civic Discourse

I am very disappointed that some of the opponents of the project have resorted to ad hominem attacks on Venture Richmond and their staff. I have worked with them on the Richmond Folk Festival since its inception and I have found them to be ethical people who are deeply committed to the larger good of the Richmond Region. Calling them “despicable,” “dishonorable,” and labeling one individual a “tool” is not my idea of civic discourse (as in “civilized”). The fact that Venture Richmond has taken all of the necessary steps to approve the plan with the City of Richmond, the state Department of Historic Resources, and the U.S. Corps of Engineers speaks to an open process. Likewise, staff members have publicly presented their plans to civic groups, including the Oregon Hill Neighborhood Association. To make such accusations, opponents have frequently resorted to innuendo regarding the removal of the brick wall at Tredegar site. I was as upset as anyone at this removal—it should NOT have happened—but it is pretty obvious based on press reports that Venture Richmond was not aware of and did not order this removal. This is truly a red herring, and should have no place in the current debate.

Some final thoughts

As a member of the Richmond Folk Festival’s Program Committee since the event’s inception, I am quite aware of why the site needs to change. The suggestion made by opponents that the amphitheatre should be moved to Brown’s Island does not solve the main problem. The event is simply

outgrowing the site, and shuffling the deck in terms of stage location does not change that reality. The loss of the Newmarket Stage makes the development of the Tredegar Green project essential to the long-term viability of the Richmond Folk Festival. In my daily conversations with civic, business, and cultural leaders in Richmond—and most importantly with everyday citizens—there is a universal consensus that the Festival is one of Richmond’s crown jewels. Let’s preserve it while also preserving our historical legacy. In this case, there is no contradiction.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Gregg D. Kimball". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the word "Sincerely,".

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