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Local woman curates Black History Museum in Richmond, Va.

By: Frank D. Quattrone, Ticket Editor

Perhaps because Philadelphia was one of the centers of the fabled Underground Railroad in the North, a desperate and courageous slave from Richmond named Henry Brown conceived of an ingenious means of escaping human bondage.

Asking his best friend to nail him into a box two feet eight inches deep, two feet wide and three feet long, with "a bladder of water and a few small biscuits" for sustenance and a small gimlet to drill holes in the box, Brown had himself shipped to abolitionists in the City of Brotherly Love in hopes of breathing, for the first time, the heady air of freedom.

The year was 1848. After an arduous, and perilous, 26-hour train ride to Philadelphia, Brown finally emerged, safe and free, at the Anti-Slavery Society at 107 N. Fifth St. Recorded in the journals of the great black abolitionist William Still, the story became a rallying point for daring, heroic slaves throughout the South. Re-dubbed Henry "Box" Brown for his successful escape, the former slave later spoke to abolitionists at the First Baptist Church of Norristown and elsewhere throughout the North.

According to Deborah L. Israel, president of PROFIT Communications, the Blue Bell public relations firm promoting the 400th anniversary of Richmond's founding, "Historically, Richmond and Philadelphia have been connected since African Americans traveled the 'Liberty Line,' commonly known as the Underground Railroad, in the 1800s. Because so many African Americans from Virginia found new homes in the Philadelphia area, the cities' genealogies and cultures are intertwined."

In modern-day Richmond, nowhere is this better represented than through the Black History Museum & Cultural Center of Virginia, where one of Philly's finest transplanted citizens, Mary C. Lauderdale, serves as the center's manager and visitor services coordinator. Born in Philadelphia and educated at Boston University and Spring Garden College in Mt. Airy, Lauderdale moved to Richmond in 1995. She discovered the Black History Museum in 1998, volunteering part-time to help the fledgling center. The museum, founded in 1981 by Carroll Anderson Sr., had moved into its present quarters at 60 Clay St. between 1st and Adams Streets in 1991 and was growing rapidly. Before the end of the year, Lauderdale, an enterprising student of African-American history, became a full-time employee and soon emerged as the center's director.

Having lived and worked in Boston and, especially, Philadelphia, Lauderdale came to appreciate the wealth of African-American history in Richmond and considered it, like Richmond itself, "too much of a best-kept secret." Since then, she has become a caretaker of that history, enthusiastically working toward preserving it - including black history for the entire commonwealth of Virginia - for posterity. The museum is located in the heart of Jackson Ward, an area of Richmond where many soldiers, ex-slaves and immigrants moved immediately after the Civil War. By the early 19th century, at the height of the "Jim Crow" era, it became popularly known as "Little Africa," and it remains the largest National Historic Landmark associated with African-American history and culture. Visitors today can take in an eye-opening permanent exhibit called "Banks, Boutiques and 'The Deuce,'" the latter being the familiar name for the section's most prominent business and cultural artery, 2nd Street, the site of so many of the enterprises that put Jackson Ward on the social, political and economic map.

Renowned as "The Birthplace of Black Capitalism" and "The Harlem of the South," Jackson Ward was the site of the first chartered African-American bank (1888), the first chartered bank owned by an African-American woman (Maggie Walker, 1903), and two famous clubs - the Globe and the Hippodrome - that, by the mid-1940s and beyond, brought significant black entertainers to the area.

Because of frequent performances by musical artists such as Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, Ruth Brown, the Five Satins, the Dixie Hummingbirds - and, yes, Jackson Ward's celebrated native son, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson - the area was known to blacks as far away as New York City; hence, the "Harlem of the South."

But even more illuminating, as we soon discovered, were some significant historical moments buried deep within mainstream recognition. In 1895, for example, more than 50 years before Rosa Parks ignited the Civil Rights Movement with her proud defiance of the blacks-in-the-back-of-the-bus ruling, John Mitchell Jr. - co-founder and editor of the Richmond Planet newspaper and president of the Mechanics Savings Bank - led a successful peaceful boycott of Richmond's segregated trolley system!

Along the way, in this handsome Federal and Greek Revival house built in 1832, through photos, artifacts and other exhibits, we meet some of Jackson Ward's (and America's) unsung heroes - educators like Rosa Dixon Bowser, entrepreneurs like Joseph L. Loving and well-rounded Richmonders like Madam Wilma Chalmers, who became a beautician, an actress, a soldier during World War Two and a senior citizen model.

We also get to see some beautiful textile wall hangings lining the stairwell to the second-floor exhibition space and some stunning quilts created by Mary Lauderdale and her so-called "Sisters of the Yam" (the African-American Quilters' Guild), a staple in the museum's fund-raising efforts. "We quilt to heal our minds, to heal our souls," said Lauderdale. "It's all about fellowship."

And during the week of March 25 to 31, Richmond Region 2007 will celebrate African-Americans' leadership and extraordinary contributions to business, science, sports, the media, education, social justice and the arts through a series of events called "African-American Trailblazers," featuring the Community Gospel Concert, storytelling at various historic sites throughout the Richmond area, erection of the Reconciliation Statue on March 30, and culminating in the African-American Trailblazers Awards on Saturday, March 31, at 7 p.m. in the Greater Richmond Convention Center.

Honorary co-chair of the weeklong events is acclaimed poet Dr. Maya Angelou. Numerous Philadelphians, including Patti LaBelle, Will Smith, Atlanta Mayor Shirley Franklin and historian Charles L. Blockson, have been nominated for the award, showing once again how strong the bridge is linking these two great American cities.

Black History Museum