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FREE

The need to get it right : Freedmen Bureau's role in Black ancestry search noted

Virginia's history is one that includes diverse people, and last week elected officials and others citizens stressed the need to have that story told right.

While gathered to note the status of the Virginia Freedmen's Bureau Indexing and Extraction Project and celebrate the unveiling of an historic and permanent marker signifying the site where the Virginia Freedmen's Bureau first operated at the end of the Civil War in 1865, Gov. Timothy M. Kaine, addressed the state's role in slavery and the fact that many Black citizens, because of slavery, have not reconnected with their history and ancestors.

"Talking honestly about slavery, the monstrous evil of slavery," will help them reconnect, said the governor.

Gov. Kaine and Del. Dwight C. Jones (D-Richmond) said that the history of

Blacks in Virginia is not one that can just be put in the past. They addressed the January comments Del. Hargrove (R-Hanover), who while speaking of a house resolution requiring Virginia to apologize for its role in slavery, said Blacks citizens should "get over it."

"Recent events that took place right here [on Capitol grounds] show us that significant reconciliation still has to happen," said Kaine, adding that Black history may have started out blotchy, but Virginia is infinitely better because of Blacks.

Jones said that while those three words may have resonated at the state Capitol, the history of slavery "tells us that our ancestors fought too much of a good fight for us to just get over it. It's a high day for inclusiveness."

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Gov. Kaine shakes hands with Stacy Burrs after unveiling the new historic marker on Capitol Square.

The need to get it right

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That inclusiveness will now allow Black citizens to search their ancestries.

Last October, Gov. Kaine announced that Virginia will be the first state in the nation to participate in an historic project to index and digitize Freedmen's Bureau records, allowing historians and descendants of emancipated slaves, freed Blacks, and Black Union soldiers to access historical data, much of which was never before available.

The Freedmen's Bureau records, according to the Black History Museum and Cultural Center of Virginia, are effectively the "genesis records" of Black identity post Civil War. They provide the earliest major compilation of information on the Black community between the period of 1865-1872 on names, legalized marriages, educational pursuits, work contracts, and receipt of rations, health care, legal, and other services.

The digitization project, a partnership between the Black History Museum, the Genealogical Society of Utah (GSU), and FamilySearch, allows GSU to scan into digital images the microfilmed records produced by the National Archives and Records Administration. Volunteers review the images of documents and record the pertinent information in software templates provided by GSU. GSU then validates the records and makes them available to extraction and indexing via FamilySearch.org. Based on the

experience gained from the Virginia Project, GSU is organizing projects for extracting and indexing Freedmen records from other southern states.

Howard University, another partner, is in the process of placing the broader collection of extracted and indexed records on the Internet for access to genealogy searchers and others.

"This is 400 years of history," said a GSU representative present at the event. "It's the story of newly freed slaves in the aftermath of the Civil War."

The Freedmen's Bureau, officially known as The Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, was established on March 3, 1865. It first addressed relief and educational activities relating to refugees and freedmen, including issuing rations, clothing, and medicine. Because it depended on the War Department for funding, the Bureau eventually suffered from a lack of funding and was disbanded in 1872. During its tenure, however, the Bureau became a rich repository of information on southern Blacks.

Among those present at the unveiling were a host of elected and appointed officials as well as genealogical experts, including Secretary of Administration Viola Baskerville, Virginia Department of Minority Business Enterprise Director Stacy Burrs, representatives of the national archives, the Genealogical Society of Utah and Luke and Nedra Bruce of the Freedmen's Bureau.

Visit www.blackhistorymuseum.org for more information on the bureau.