

A light at the end of the tunnel

Quest for memorial honoring black Revolutionary War veterans enters new chapter

By Katelyn Guderian

For decades, Alexandria resident Maurice Barboza sought to honor black soldiers and sailors who fought for America's freedom during the Revolutionary War.

Barboza, whose forefathers also fought in the Revolution, is the mastermind behind the proposed National Liberty Memorial. If and when it is built, the tribute will pay homage to the thousands of slaves and free black men from across the country that served during the war, including four from Alexandria.

Last month, Congress approved a bill allowing work on the National Liberty Memorial to move ahead. After struggling for more than a decade to get lawmakers to embrace his memorial, an incredulous Barboza watched as the Senate and House of Representatives approved the bill.

There was not one dissenting vote.

"A lot of things had to happen perfectly in order for this to happen," Barboza said. "I didn't think it was going to happen. There was just no way this was going to happen."

On September 26, President Barack Obama signed into law H.J. Res. 120, which, according to a White House press release, "approves the location of a memorial near the National Mall to honor slaves and free black persons who served or provided assistance during the American Revolution."



A conceptual scale model of the proposed memorial to African Americans who fought in the American Revolution. Model by David Newton Sculpture of Dallas. (Courtesy of Maurice Barboza)

The preferred location for the memorial is in downtown Washington on 14th Street between Independence Avenue and Jefferson Drive. Although several other options are being considered, this site on the National Mall is the first choice of Barboza and his team.

While the spot still needs to undergo an environmental assessment before work can begin, Barboza considers the area perfect for the memorial.

“We didn’t even know this site existed until the initial site study was conducted,” Barboza said. “Our objective criteria would have led us right to this place. The primary consideration was either proximity to the Washington Monument or view of the Washington Monument.”

Because no federal money can be used to build the memorial, Barboza and those working with him must focus on fundraising. Barboza hopes “anyone who feels an affinity for this” will be able to donate to help the cause move forward.

“Our next goal will be to raise enough funds to perform environmental assessments and get architects working on designs,” Barboza said.

The preliminary design for the National Liberty Memorial’s central element is a statue of a man, woman and child standing together with an American flag. The final design may not be decided upon for several years. Barboza’s National Liberty Memorial Fund has until January 2019 to raise the money necessary to qualify for a building permit.

Alexandria community members who have supported Barboza’s efforts over the years are celebrating alongside him. Mayor Bill Euille is chief among them.

“Kudos to [Barboza] and his many supporters for this historic moment, which is long overdue,” Euille said in a statement.

“Patience and persistence was well worth the wait. The public will now be able to share in this history and know of the importance to our nation’s history, as well.”

In 2011, Euille and his colleagues on Alexandria City Council approved a resolution backing the project. Though local historians were well versed in what life was like for local blacks during the Civil War, they knew little about the community’s role in the Revolutionary War.

They were pleasantly surprised to learn of Benjamin Whitmore, Joseph Longdon, John Pipisco and William Lee, black Alexandrians who fought for independence.

Barboza hopes more communities along the East Coast will realize how residents of their towns contributed to the war effort. In addition to representatives from the original 13 colonies, blacks from Kentucky, Tennessee, Ohio, Louisiana, Maine, Vermont and Michigan also fought for America during the war.

“We’re all here because of the principles we believe in,” Barboza said. “Our nation is defined by principles.”