

Opinion

PAGE 13 | SECTION A | SUNDAY, MAY 3, 2026 |

Kevin Goyette: Managing Editor
kgoyette@dailypress.com

The Virginian-Pilot | **Daily**  **Press**

Brian Colligan: Opinion Editor
brian.colligan@pilotonline.com

Use a neglected corner of the Mall to honor American patriots

By Maurice A. Barboza
GUEST COLUMNIST

The western side of the Jamie L. Whitten Building, on the gateway to the National Mall from Virginia, is a Beaux-Arts masterpiece obscured by an asphalt parking lot and cordoned off from public use by shrubbery, fencing and serpentine plastic barricades. A far higher purpose is suggested by the blend of the sublime façade and other nearby symbols — a National Liberty Memorial. Years ago, a nine-agency panel reported, “All members supported location of the memorial at this site.”

We propose a Precursor Garden leading to a National Liberty Memorial — bronze and flower petals that will vouch for recent scholarship and silent heroes. The Battle of Great Bridge near Norfolk on Dec. 9, 1775, will come to be recognized with the same gravity as Lexington and Concord, and Bunker Hill. The victory freed Virginia from colonial rule and released its massive resources to fuel the American cause, setting the stage for Yorktown.

In defiance of the looming presence of

the Washington Monument, the parking chokes off the opportunity the setting presents to expose a new Virginia history to light. A Precursor Garden will reveal Great Bridge and hundreds of overlooked Virginians such as Ned Streater. Revolution and independence bind them naturally to Gen. George Washington. On that cold morning, Streater joined the battle after having walked all night for more than 20 miles.

While the National Liberty Memorial will honor as many as 10,000 African American combatants, Streater is special; he is evocative of them all. He served in the Virginia militia and was disabled by a musket ball. But he remained enslaved after the war despite Virginia’s 1783 statute freeing soldiers. He turned to the courts, secured his freedom and recovered compensation for his labor. He represents the unacknowledged relentless will of the enslaved to challenge a system stacked with unfairness.

Streater and his compatriots are far more valuable to the nation than a cordoned-off parking lot. But after a decade, the lot installed as early as 1950

remains a blight. This exceeds deferred maintenance and neglect; it is a calculable depreciation of the storehouse of vital American history. In the decades since, those spaces have been occupied hundreds of thousands of times. In those moments, a public servant stood on the foundation of what could be a new national story, oblivious to the lessons compressed by the weight of their cars and themselves. The earth below was squeezed of life. The soil is dead, as the history could be, without the transfusion of live soil and decisive action. The garden would answer how neglect and ancient impulses could not compress spirits such as Streater.

The western façade of Whitten is low-hanging fruit. Reclaiming it on July 4 would free a work of classical art at minimal expense. A bold executive directive could achieve in 60 days what has taken 40 years. The president, during a Black History Month gathering in February, set the tone: “You have never been given the recognition that you deserve.”

After pleading 40 years for these patriots, I plead again for the installation of a

Precursor Garden. The four o’clock, as the primary interpretive element, is a nocturnal plant exhibiting the resilience of the history. It opens just as people are sitting down for dinner and eyes are starting to close with the onset of night. In Thomas Jefferson’s words, “Mirabilis just opened, how clever.”

I expect to hear Jefferson’s exclamation aplenty when the garden and memorial open on July 4, 2026, and Sep. 23, 2029. This temporary installation will persuade skeptics of the worth of a permanent memorial. This pollinator garden will renew every summer with the same regularity and national enthusiasm as the cherry blossoms.

Maurice A. Barboza of Alexandria is the founder and CEO of the National Mall Liberty Fund DC and a descendant of Revolutionary War patriots. He is responsible for the passage of a dozen bills in his decades-long advocacy for a National Liberty Memorial to honor the role of African Americans in the Revolutionary War.