

# THE ROANOKE TIMES



MOSTLY SUNNY 37 • 20 FORECAST, A10

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THE ROANOKE TIMES, FILE 2021

Henrietta Lacks Plaza stretches along Church Avenue Southwest between Second and Third streets, between the Noel C. Taylor Municipal Building on the north and the U.S. Bankruptcy Court on the south.

## Lacks statue proposed

The fundraising effort aims to honor Henrietta Lacks at the plaza named for her

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Now that an area in downtown Roanoke is named Henrietta Lacks Plaza, advocates want to privately raise \$140,000 to erect a statue of her.

Lacks, a Black woman from Roanoke, went to The Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland, for cancer treatment in 1951. Doctors couldn't save her, but they discovered that her cells were capable of growing outside her body in a laboratory vessel.

The cells, which are still alive, morphed into a "remarkably durable and

prolific line" and supported the discovery of research breakthroughs around the world, the medical center said.

Problem was, doctors didn't obtain Lacks' permission to use her cells in medical research; the university says the research project some 70 years ago occurred before the inception of informed consent. Her family members say they weren't informed until the 1970s. Put in the spotlight, key beneficiaries including Johns Hopkins have sought to make amends.

In Roanoke, only the Science Museum of Western Virginia honors Lacks with a public display, with her name engraved on a staircase listing contributors to science. Lacks is honored with signs, markers, statues and exhibits in various

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COURTESY ASSOCIATED PRESS VIA THE LACKS FAMILY AND HENRIETTA LACKS FOUNDATION

Henrietta Lacks, whose body produced super cells that led to some of the greatest advancements of the 20th century, lived part of her early life in a long-gone house near the train tracks in the vicinity of Norfolk Avenue and 12th Street in Roanoke.

lot beside heavily traveled Interstate 95 and about 500 yards from the Virginia State Capitol where it all happened. Narration, recreations and readings flesh out the story.

People who have seen Hidden In Plain Site Richmond have told the producers they will never feel the same way about parts of the city covered in the presentation, said Dean Browell, a market researcher and member of the Hidden In Plain Site team. Dontrese

Brown, an educator, and David Waltenbaugh, a virtual reality developer, are also on the team.

Hidden in Plain Site also produced a presentation on indigenous people in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and has other projects lined up. Each one is an attempt to unearth important history and tell it accurately with extensive detail.

Browell said there is an historical sign in Louisa County recognizing Henry "Box" Brown, a

person who was enslaved on a Louisa-area plantation but escaped slavery by shipping himself in a box to Philadelphia. Hidden In Plain Site Richmond tied its telling of Brown's story to the address of the shipping company in downtown Richmond that unwittingly handled his box, according to the presentation, he said.

Lacks could be a character in the Roanoke presentation, assuming it is funded, because her

story is hidden in that many people do not know it, Browell and White-Boyd agreed. Her home is believed to have stood in Southwest Roanoke's Perry Park. It's without a marker.

Checks should be made out to the Harrison Museum, the fundraiser's fiscal agent, with the phrase "Henrietta Lacks" on the memo line. Contributions should be mailed to: The Harrison Museum, P.O. Box 21054, Roanoke, Va. 24018.

## Fundraiser

From A1

places of the United States and world. Assuming fundraising is successful, the Roanoke statue would be life-size and go in the west half of the former Lee Plaza beside the Noel C. Taylor Municipal Building.

The city council renamed the west side for Lacks in July.

But is a statue enough?

Vice Mayor Trish White-Boyd, who initiated the plaza renaming and statue project, doesn't think so.

The vice mayor has gotten in touch with a group of cultural educators in Richmond who produced a multimedia presentation about some of that community's unknown or forgotten Black history. It's called Hidden in Plain Site Richmond and is available free online.

If Roanoke can raise an additional \$40,000, the plan is to contract with the Hidden In Plain Site team to create a similar presentation about Roanoke's hidden history, White-Boyd said.

Hidden In Plain Site Richmond can be viewed on a computer, phone or virtual reality headset. The viewer, clicking at their own pace, goes virtually to 10 locations keyed to events that shaped the experiences of Black people living in Richmond during the 1800s and 1900s. The locations, generally without statues or monuments today, existed in "plain" sight with only limited public knowledge of what took place, according to the producers.

For instance, one part of the Richmond presentation focuses on Robert Lumpkin and his Lumpkin's Jail. The producers depicted the notorious holding facility for enslaved people within modern-day images of the grass



Learn more and donate at [www.RoanokeHiddenHistories.org](http://www.RoanokeHiddenHistories.org)

# Roanoke needs statue of Henrietta Lacks

**Y**es, Roanoke, let's have a statue honoring Henrietta Lacks.

We've often written in these pages that the Star City could be doing a lot more to commemorate its history and legacy. Lacks is hardly the only personnage of national historical significance who has roots here.

Could the sparseness of statuary celebrating achievements of Roanoke-connected figures be the result of a dearth of community pride that's been cited as an impediment to past economic development? Or could it just be that, you know, well-made statues are expensive? Perhaps a combination of the two.

The proposed sculpture of Lacks, to be funded by private donations, would draw justified, needed attention to an astonishing story of global importance that began in Roanoke.

In July, the city council renamed Lee Plaza, the public square next to the city municipal building. The name it bore for 64 years honored Confederate General Robert E. Lee.

The east half of the square, which holds the Roanoke Valley War Memorial, became Freedom Plaza. The west half — where a 10-foot-tall marker bearing Lee's name had stood until 2020, when an anxious citizen preemptively pulled it down — became Henrietta Lacks Plaza.

Advocates led by Vice Mayor Trish White-Boyd hope to privately raise at least \$140,000 to put a life-size figure of Lacks in the plaza that bears her name. White-Boyd is aiming for an additional \$40,000 that would create a multimedia presentation to share Lacks' story and expound on the history of Roanoke's Black communities. The Harrison Museum of African American Culture is the fiscal agent for this worthy fundraising effort.



COURTESY ASSOCIATED PRESS  
VIA THE LACKS FAMILY AND  
HENRIETTA LACKS FOUNDATION

Henrietta Lacks' body produced super cells that led to some of the greatest advancements of the 20th century.

sector, Lacks' descendants did not benefit from any of the scientific advancements or industry profits that her cells enabled.

In fact, they did not learn about the existence and use of HeLa until the 1970s, when researchers approached them, wanting to know if cells from Lacks' children and grandchildren possessed similar traits.

Although the taking of sample tissue without permission was standard practice in 1951, the revelation of the HeLa cells' origins stirred echoes of the long, grotesque history in America of cruel exploitation of Black patients, such as the Tuskegee syphilis study, wherein U.S. government researchers lied for 40 years to the Black male participants, falsely telling the men they were receiving treatment while allowing the disease to take its full course and observing the results.

Lacks' biography and complex legacy became known worldwide after American science writer Rebecca Skloot, working with Lacks' family, wrote "The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks," a nonfiction book 10 years in the making that became a massive bestseller and inspired a 2017 HBO adaptation starring Oprah Winfrey, who played Lacks' youngest daughter, Deborah.

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## OPINION

THURSDAY, JANUARY 13, 2022

### EDITORIAL

Sam Worthington • Regional President  
Brian Kelley, Editor | Mike Allen, Editorial Page Editor

Lacks' story is one that combines medical miracles with troubling scientific ethics.

Born in 1920 in Roanoke, the young Henrietta (originally named Loretta) moved to a tobacco farm in Halifax County with her family after the death of her mother. She married her cousin and moved to Baltimore. After giving birth to her fifth child, she was diagnosed with cervical cancer. Ten months after the diagnosis, in October 1951, the cancer took the 31-year-old mother's life. She was buried in an unmarked grave.

The strange turn that would bring Lacks posthumous fame happened during her cancer treatment at The John Hopkins Hospital, at the time the only hospital in the region that would treat indigent Black patients. A sample of her cancer cells, taken without her consent or knowledge — a common medical practice at the time, regardless of sex or race — proved able to survive and multiply outside of her body.

To this day, her cells, known as HeLa cells, live on, making it possible for scientists to conduct tests on human tissue without having to experiment on live people. Because they can be easily cultured and transported, HeLa cells have proven crucial to a host of major medical breakthroughs through the decades, from the polio vaccine to COVID-19 vaccines.

HeLa cells have been used in studies of leukemia, AIDS and the effects of zero gravity, and played roles in a variety of important advancements, from chemotherapy to in vitro fertilization.

Though HeLa cells were essential to the growth of the multibillion dollar biotechnology

Skloot, whose descriptions brought the real woman behind the medical miracle to vivid life, used the book's proceeds to create the Henrietta Lacks Foundation, which benefits the Lacks family and others like the descendants of the Tuskegee study survivors.

Lacks' story gained another realm of influence as medical institutions revisited and revised policies related to bioethics and the consent of patients. Johns Hopkins ended up working with the Lacks family and the National Institutes of Health on an agreement that requires researchers to acquire permission to use HeLa cells in NIH-funded projects.

Lacks' childhood home is believed to have stood at 12th Street and Norfolk Avenue, where you'll now find Perry Park's basketball court. Beyond the proposed statue, a historical marker would certainly be apropos, if feasible, though one already stands in Clover, were she married and where she's buried. Historical markers installed in the recent past have highlighted the Roanoke connections to the careers of civil rights attorney Oliver Hill, whose efforts ended school segregation, and pioneering Black filmmaker Oscar Micheaux.

Hill, Micheaux and other history makers such as Gov. Linwood Holton, Congressman Caldwell Butler, and Margie Jumper, who has been referred to as Roanoke's version of Rosa Parks, would all be great candidates for projects similar to the one that's been launched to honor Lacks.

Should Roanoke succeed in putting up a statue of Henrietta Lacks, such efforts need not, and should not, end with her.

