

T. Tyler Potterfield Jr., a Richmond housing and senior preservation planner, dies at 55

'Leading light' of planned Brown's Island Dam Walk

BY ELLEN ROBERTSON AND GRAHAM MOOMAW Richmond Times-Dispatch posted May 1st, 2014.
Updated



Thomas Tyler Potterfield Jr.'s passion and profession was architectural preservation.

When he died Friday morning in a Richmond hospital at 55, "he really had professionally reached his stride. He was a comfortable and a forward-looking person," said Selden Richardson, a Richmond architectural historian and preservationist who met him 15 years ago, when they both were taking classes at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Mr. Potterfield, a senior planner in the Richmond Department of Planning and Development Review, was the project manager — the "leading light," Richardson said — of Richmond's planned Brown's Island Dam Walk, which will put a span about 1,600 feet long from Brown's Island to the foot of the Manchester climbing wall.

It will be the first direct crossing of the James River in Richmond dedicated to pedestrian and bicycle traffic. The Dam Walk is a key element in the city's Riverfront Plan to revamp the riverfront and make it a more impressive attraction.

"The Dam Walk was going to be the milestone of his career. His enthusiasm was quite infectious," Richardson said.

"He had a quiet professionalism backed up by the faith that he could make the city a better place for everybody," Richardson said. "He had a natural enthusiasm and abiding faith in the city. I found that refreshing."

When Mr. Potterfield came to Richmond in 1991, he had been interested in Richmond and Virginia architectural history for some time. He continued his pursuit of information on two African-American architects, Charles T. Russell and John A. Lankford, who left their mark on Jackson Ward and the Virginia Union University campus. That research wrote another chapter in Virginia's architectural history, especially as it applies to African-Americans.

He had served as secretary of the Richmond Commission of Architectural Review.

His book published in 2009, “Nonesuch Place: A History of the Richmond Landscape,” explored the topography of Richmond and how society was layered on it. With the book, “you now had a stage that was clearly defined,” Richardson said. “You could see how history was enacted on it. There were all those layers and layers of society and how they lay on the land. It was a quite a fresh look at the city and its society.”

Rachel O. Flynn, former director of planning and development for Richmond and now director of planning and building for Oakland, Calif., recalled, “He was extremely dedicated to the city and showed this through his vast research and prolific writing to tell Richmond’s story. He was always taking [the] initiative to figure out ways to save historic structures, eliminate blight, and find occupants for vacant structures. His death is an enormous loss for the city.”

A family representative said that the cause of Mr. Potterfield’s death is not known.

Several city officials have noted his passing this week.

In a statement, Mayor Dwight C. Jones said that Mr. Potterfield’s was a name he heard a lot about “right away after first taking office.”

“His passing represents a true loss for our city as his work has touched the fabric of so much in Richmond,” Jones said. “Our hearts go out to his family and friends and we hope they know that his work family shares in their grief.”

Prior to a presentation on the dam walk Monday, Mark A. Olinger, the current director of planning and development, said that Mr. Potterfield’s position can be filled, but he can never be replaced.

In an interview, Olinger said Mr. Potterfield was heavily engaged with planning students at VCU and loved introducing people to “the history of the city and the promise of the city.”

“It’s that kind of regular interaction with people that I think has clearly been demonstrated in the outpouring of shock,” Olinger said. “I think everybody understands there was a person here who cared deeply about the city.”

City Councilwoman Ellen F. Robertson said she had known Mr. Potterfield for more than 30 years. She called him “a guy that spoke very quietly and softly but was very much engaged and committed to Richmond and the preservation of its character.”

“We’re grateful for the time that God shared him with us,” Robertson said.

A native of Montgomery County, Md., Mr. Potterfield identified with his father’s home county of Loudoun, where he gained many values and his love of history. He had been a preservationist in Georgia and Ohio before coming to Richmond.

He earned a bachelor’s degree from Capital University in Ohio and a master’s degree from Middle Tennessee State University.

Survivors include his wife, Maura Meinhardt; his parents, Ruth and Thomas Potterfield Sr. of Savannah, Ga.; and a sister, Elizabeth “Beth” Hiers of Destin, Fla.

Plans for a service were incomplete Wednesday night.