

BREAK BREAK WATER

SITE | SEE ALEXANDRIA WATERFRONT

NEKISHA
DUPRETT

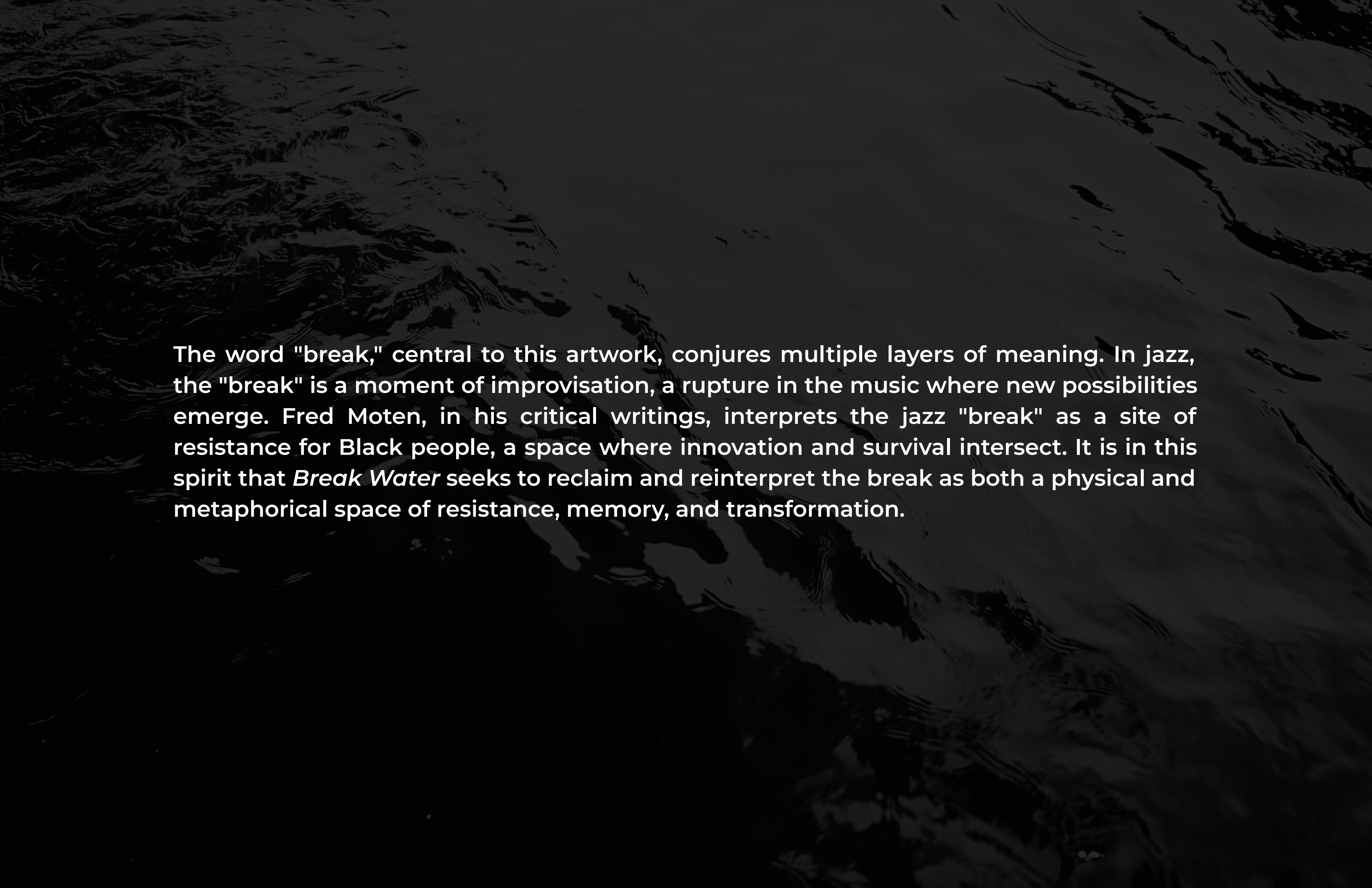
An aerial photograph of a breakwater structure in the ocean. The breakwater is composed of numerous concrete tetrapods, which are dark, geometric structures arranged in a circular pattern. The water is dark and turbulent, with white foam from the waves crashing against the breakwater. The overall scene is dramatic and emphasizes the power of nature and the resilience of the structure.

**“WHATEVER RUNS OFF US, A CERTAIN
OFFENSE RUNS THROUGH US.”**

— Fred Moten

In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radicalism Tradition (2003)

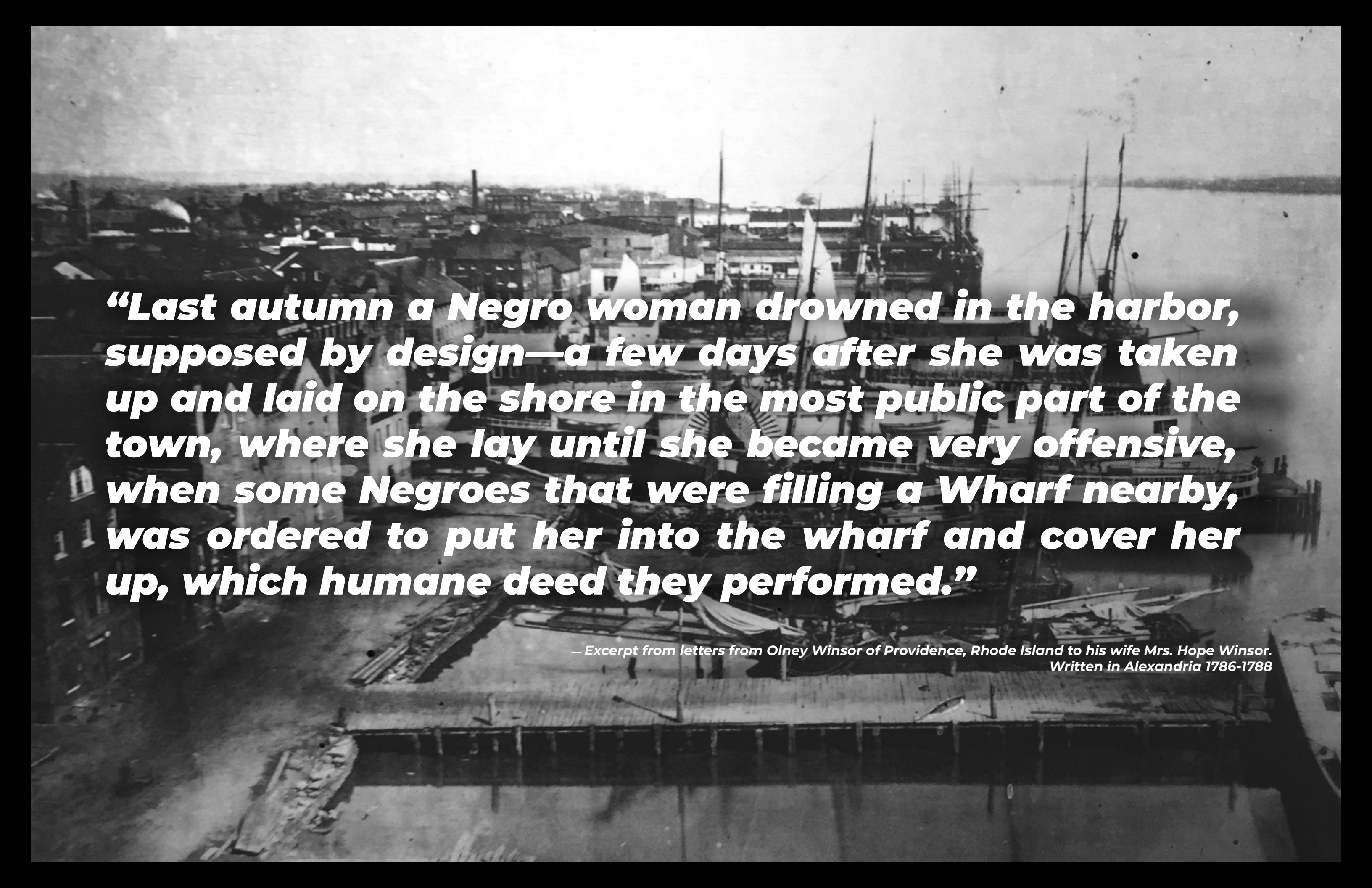
At the historic Alexandria, VA Waterfront—a site where the past is steeped in the currents of the Potomac River and the legacy of enslaved labor—American scholar, poet, and cultural theorist Fred Moten’s words resonate with haunting clarity. The persistent flooding that plagues this area serves as a reminder of nature’s unyielding power, as well as the unresolved offenses that continue to ripple through history. *Break Water*, both a site of remembrance and a celebration, stands at the intersection of these forces, where water and memory, grief and resilience converge.



The word "break," central to this artwork, conjures multiple layers of meaning. In jazz, the "break" is a moment of improvisation, a rupture in the music where new possibilities emerge. Fred Moten, in his critical writings, interprets the jazz "break" as a site of resistance for Black people, a space where innovation and survival intersect. It is in this spirit that *Break Water* seeks to reclaim and reinterpret the break as both a physical and metaphorical space of resistance, memory, and transformation.

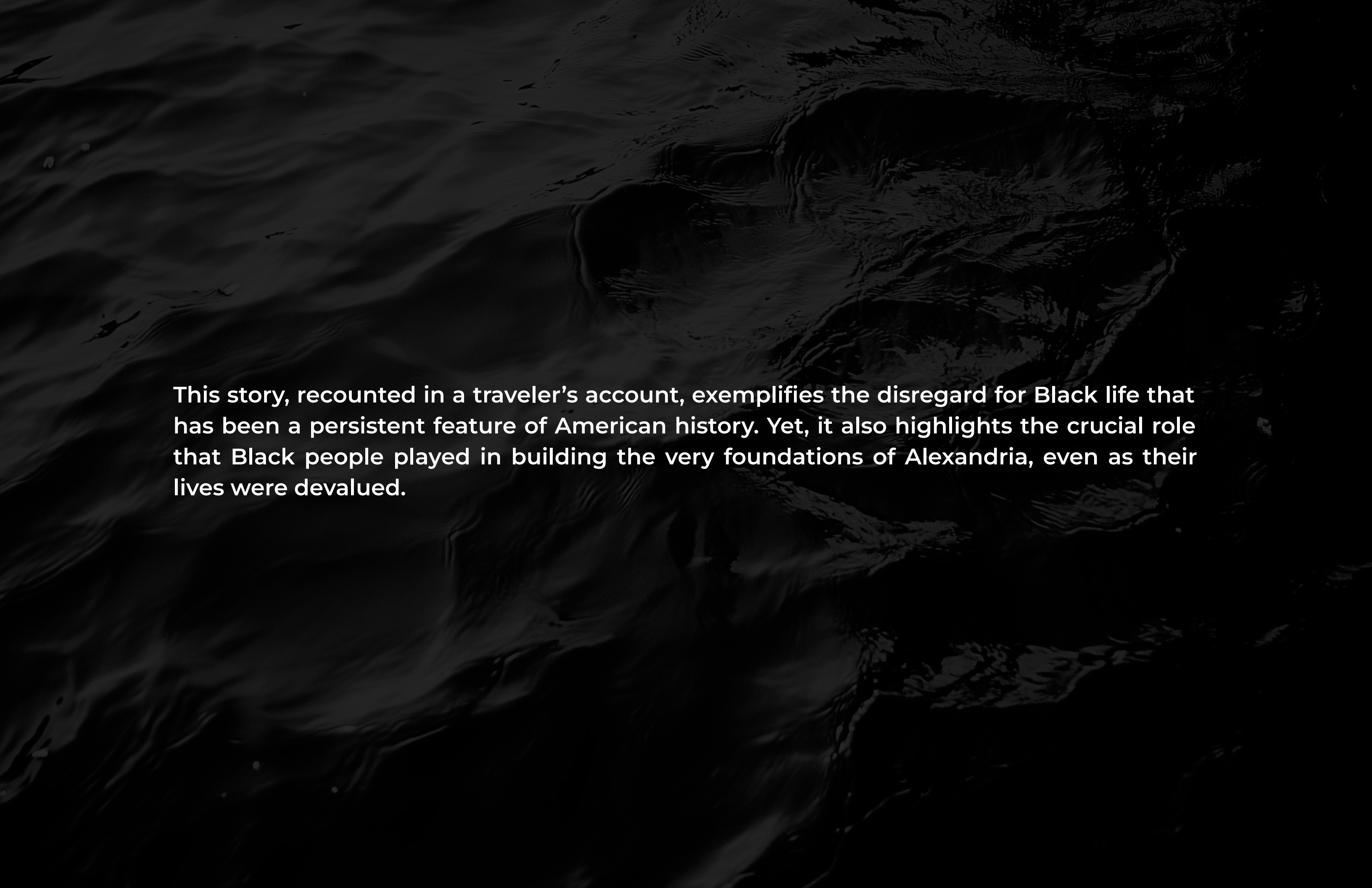


View from Pioneer Mill looking up the wharf. Alexandria, VA. May 1865.

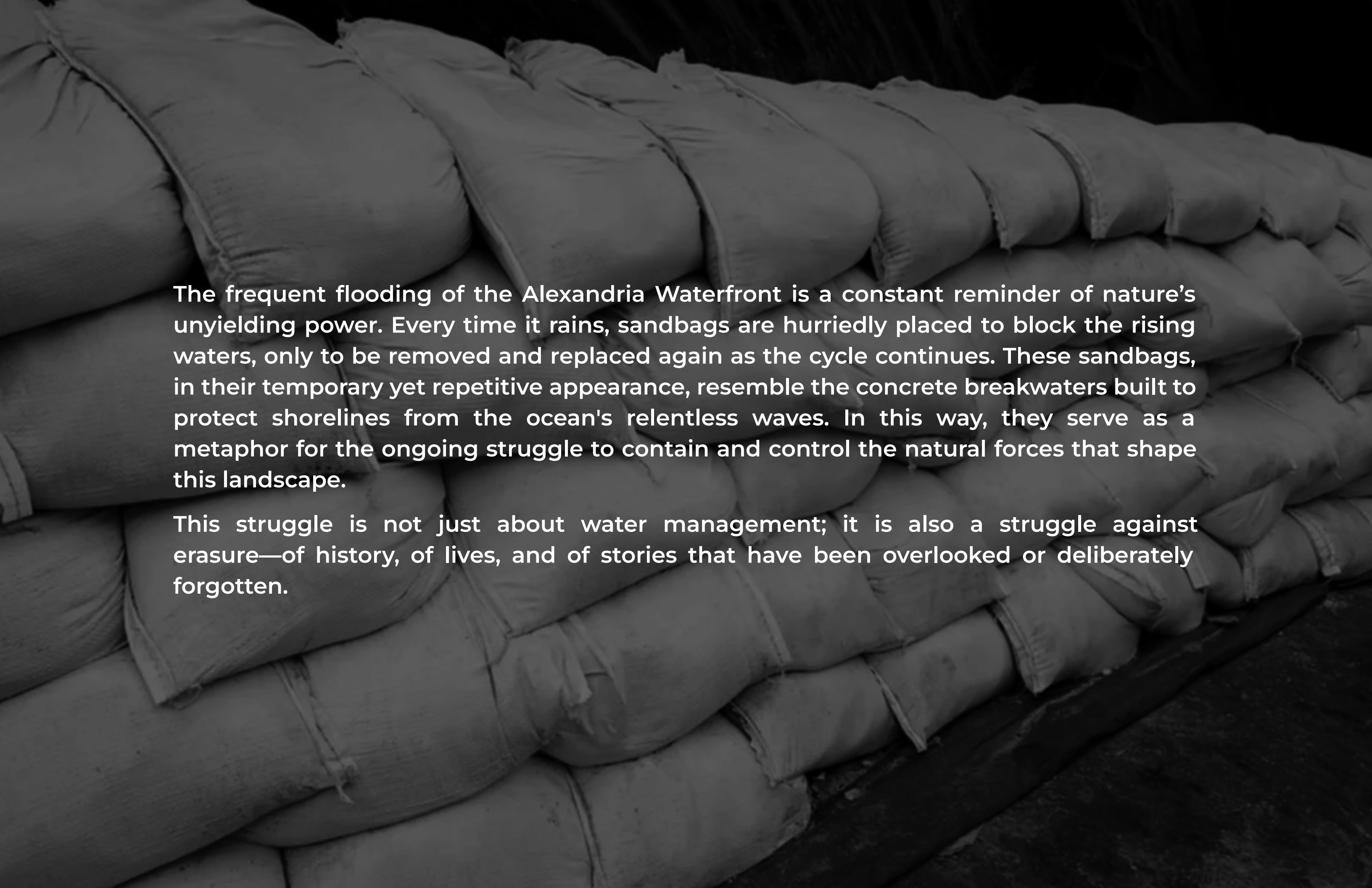


“Last autumn a Negro woman drowned in the harbor, supposed by design—a few days after she was taken up and laid on the shore in the most public part of the town, where she lay until she became very offensive, when some Negroes that were filling a Wharf nearby, was ordered to put her into the wharf and cover her up, which humane deed they performed.”

*— Excerpt from letters from Olney Winsor of Providence, Rhode Island to his wife Mrs. Hope Winsor.
Written in Alexandria 1786-1788*



This story, recounted in a traveler's account, exemplifies the disregard for Black life that has been a persistent feature of American history. Yet, it also highlights the crucial role that Black people played in building the very foundations of Alexandria, even as their lives were devalued.



The frequent flooding of the Alexandria Waterfront is a constant reminder of nature's unyielding power. Every time it rains, sandbags are hurriedly placed to block the rising waters, only to be removed and replaced again as the cycle continues. These sandbags, in their temporary yet repetitive appearance, resemble the concrete breakwaters built to protect shorelines from the ocean's relentless waves. In this way, they serve as a metaphor for the ongoing struggle to contain and control the natural forces that shape this landscape.

This struggle is not just about water management; it is also a struggle against erasure—of history, of lives, and of stories that have been overlooked or deliberately forgotten.

The centerpiece of *Break Water* is a partial recreation of the side-wheel steamer *River Queen*, a vessel that briefly held a place of pride in Black ownership during the early 1910s. The *River Queen* was more than just a boat; it symbolized a fleeting moment of Black autonomy and enterprise in a society that was, and often still is, hostile to such endeavors. The mysterious burning of the *River Queen*, widely believed to be an act of racially motivated arson, underscores the violent resistance that Black success has historically met in America.



The *River Queen* docked along the Potomac River.



"The Peacemakers," painting by George Peter Alexander Healy, 1868. Seated aboard the steamboat "River Queen" for the Hampton Roads Conference are L-R:

William Tecumseh Sherman, Ulysses S. Grant, Abraham Lincoln, and David Dixon Porter. Courtesy The White House Historical Society.



Alexandrians at Johnson Pool

Decades after the burning of the *River Queen*, in the 1950s, two Black boys tragically drowned in the Potomac River after attempting to sail in a makeshift boat fashioned out of cardboard. Their deaths were a direct result of the systemic racism that denied Black people access to safe swimming facilities, forcing them to seek recreation in dangerous and unregulated waters. These stories of loss are not just personal tragedies; they are part of a larger narrative of racial injustice and the ongoing struggle for Black survival.

A monument of the city founder Duke de Richelieu is seen covered with sandbags for protection, amid Russia's invasion of Ukraine, in central Odessa, Ukraine on March 9, 2022.





RENDERINGS

Break Water takes inspiration from both the environmental challenges and the deeply layered Black history of the site. Much like the water that relentlessly rushes in, the histories of Black people who lived, labored, and lost their lives here cannot be contained—they persist, demanding recognition.



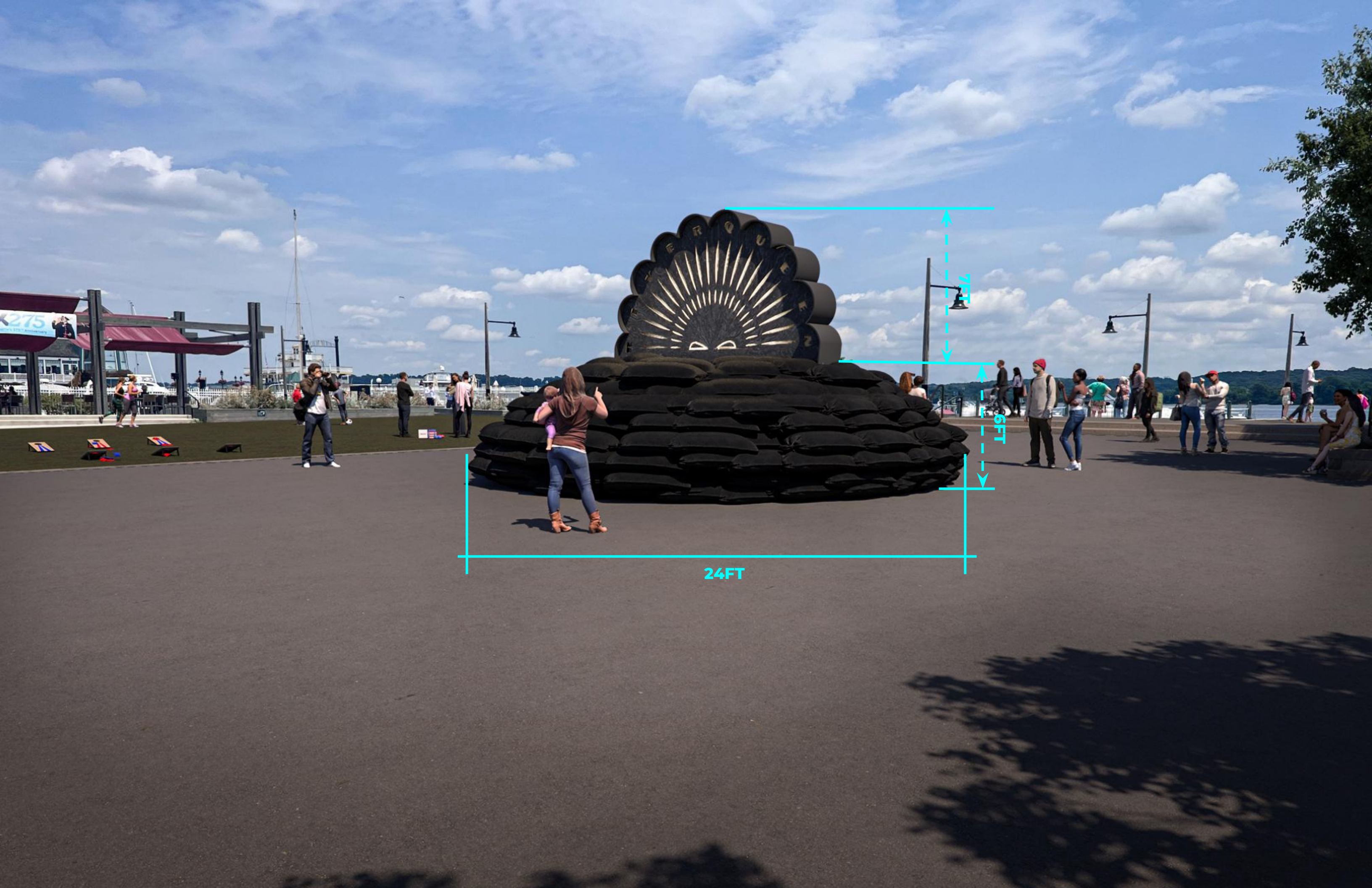
Encircled by the black sandbags, this reimagined *River Queen* emerges from the ground like a defiant monument, a tribute to the strength and resilience of Black Americans who have endured systemic marginalization while continuously creating spaces of belonging and creativity.







Yet, this work is not solely about struggle. In stark contrast to the dark tones of the sandbags and sculpture, the surrounding asphalt ground will be painted with colorful graphics and shuffleboard games, echoing the vibrant life that would have animated the deck of the *River Queen*.



24FT

6FT

7FT



Painted street plaza by
Jessie and Katey for Mural
Arts Philadelphia.



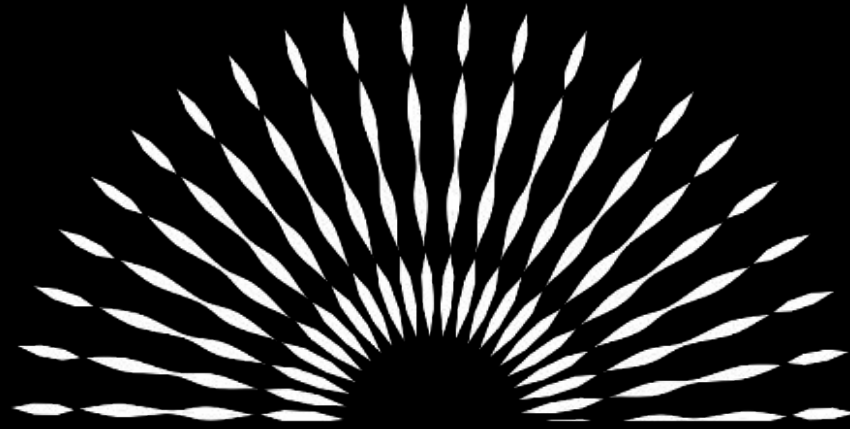
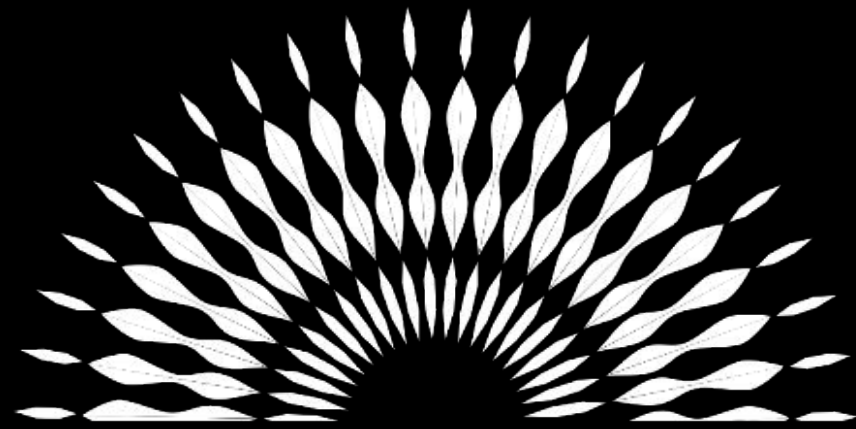
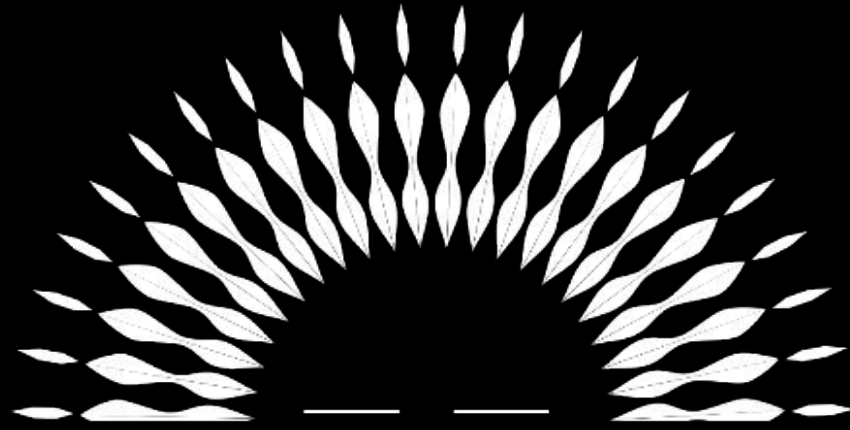
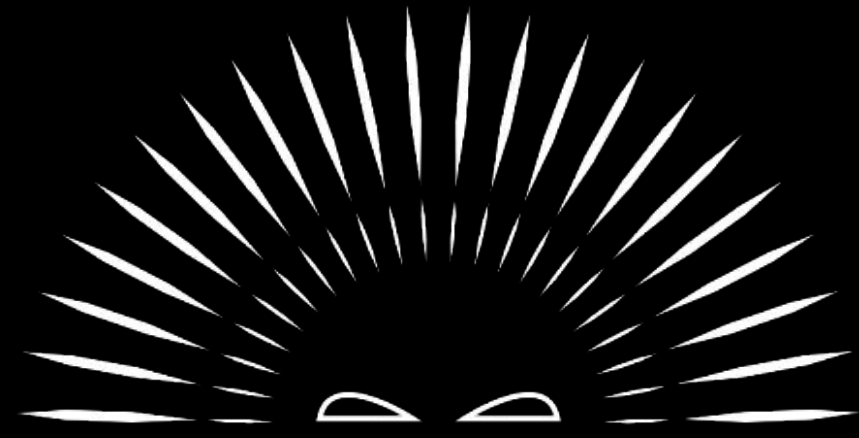
Artist and location not
known.

“DECK” INSPO

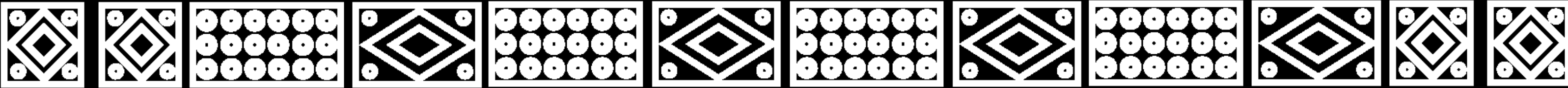
This playful, joyful element invites viewers to engage with the artwork in a manner that transcends the heavy history it embodies.



The sculpture itself emanates light, symbolizing hope and the enduring spirit of a community that has found ways to thrive despite the forces against it.



**FACE DESIGN
VARIATIONS**

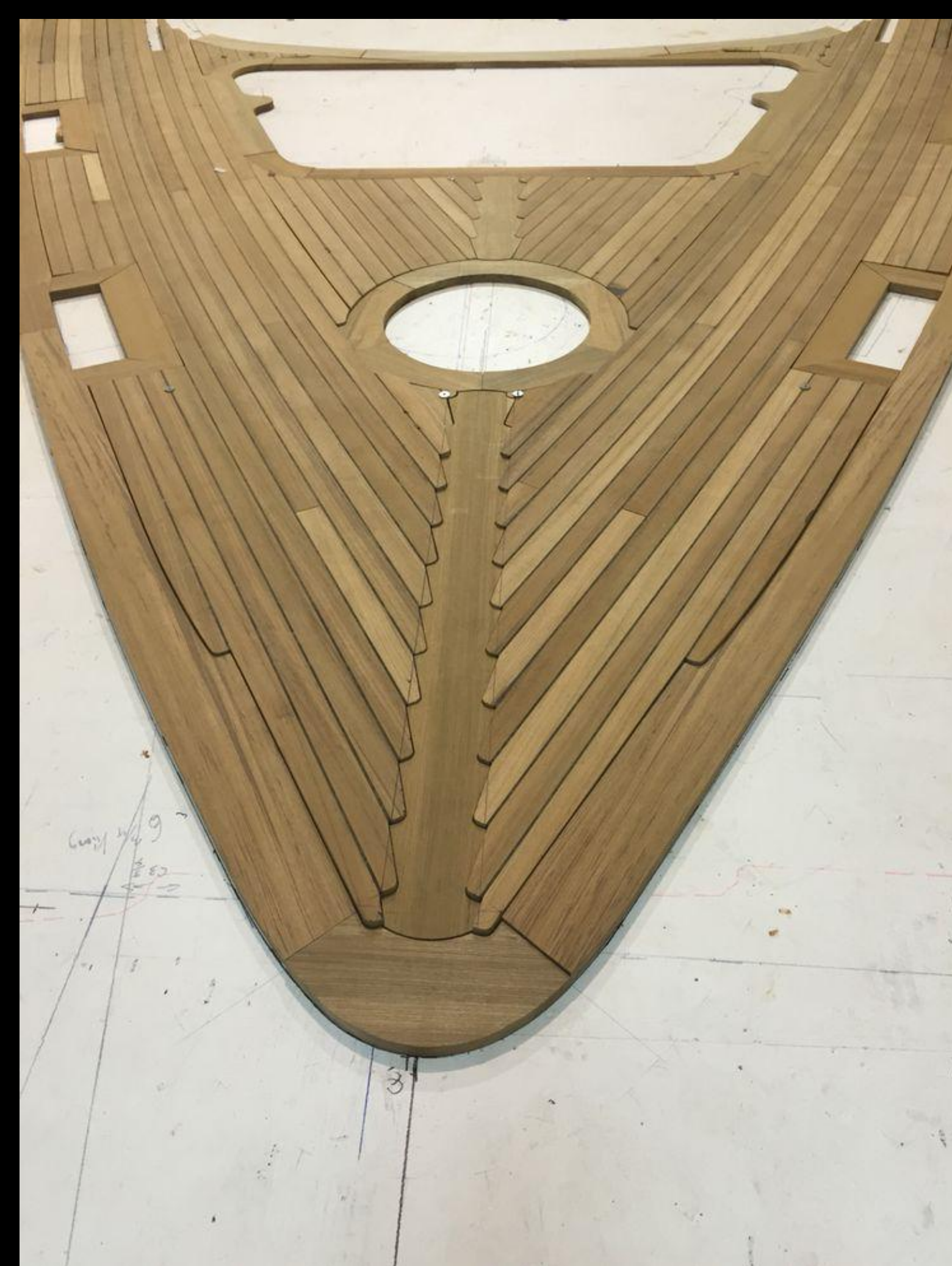


SCREEN PRINTED SANDBAG MOTIFS

The black, sandbags filled with black sand that form the base of *Break Water* will be screen printed with these designs that can be found around the roof soffits of Monticello. They are hand carved designs by John Hemmings, the master joiner and enslaved son of Elizabeth Hemings. (also enslaved at Monticello).

Sandbag filling and screen printing will be part of the projects community engagement as these tasks will be assisted by volunteer members of the Alexandria community.

Wood detailing on the exterior of Monticello by John Hemings.



**BOAT DESIGN
INSPO**





Teens playing shuffleboard in a Florida Negro youth center in 1955.



Teens playing shuffleboard in a Chicago Negro youth center in 1955.



Sailors playing shuffleboard aboard a Flight deck in 1945.