

A TRIBUTE IN LIGHTS: Veterans Day, November 11, 2013

By E. Dianne Nelson Watkins, Richmond, Virginia

Bells For Peace, Inc with Virginia Union University (VUU) lights the Robert L.Vann Memorial Tower of the Belgian Friendship Building, Veterans Day, November 11, 2013 as its new tower bells chime. Once dark and silent against the Richmond skyline, the majestic 161' tower will be a tribute to veterans of all colors and creeds who were processed in the Belgian Building for WWII; and to all who have served in America's foreign wars.

The Belgian Friendship Building was the Eastern Virginia "induction site" for draftees entering World War II during 1943 until 1947. More than 161,000 individuals from Eastern Virginia were processed at the site; 40,236 of whom were selected for military service. **(Richmond News Leader, Thursday, February 4, 1943, p.3 and Richmond News Leader, Thursday, July 24, 1947 p. 23; and a John M. Ellison letter dated Jan. 14, 1944, VUU Archives.) Watkins**

New regulations had required that recruits for the armed services be accepted through the Selective Service system. Larger locations were needed. Because Richmond's Blue's Armory, the former location, was 13,000 square feet, the spacious Belgian Friendship Building, could more easily accommodate processing the draftees with its 20,000 square feet of floor space,. **(Richmond News Leader, Thursday, February 4, 1943, p.3) Watkins**

Belgium awarded its 1939 New York World's Fair Pavilion to VUU in 1941 because of the university's educational mission and location. At the time Belgium was under siege by Germany and could not return its building to its homeland. ax Belgium's gift to VUU was a powerful gesture of brotherhood and international goodwill years before Civil Rights Laws were enacted.

Located at Lombardy Street and Brook Road, the Belgian Friendship Building is designated by the U.S. Department of Interior as a National Treasure and Virginia Historical Landmark. Belgium presented the building's 35 tower peace bells to Former President Herbert Hoover for his new library at Stanford University before the building left New York. Their gift to Mr. Hoover was in appreciation for his humanitarian relief efforts in Belgium after WWI. Neither university had acknowledged their common history until 2004 when the connection was brought to public attention through the work of Bells for Peace, Inc.

"Bells for Peace, Inc." is a non-profit organization approved under section 501 (c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. It is working with the university to restore the Belgian Building. To date it has partnered with the university to install a carillon and restore the bas reliefs on the building. The charity was founded on the joint legacies of the late Dr. John Malcus Ellison, Sr., first African American president of VUU from 1941-1955, and his late wife, Elizabeth Balfour Ellison. They invested in people, enabling countless students to make profound contributions to their communities world-wide. Dr. Ellison raised \$500,000 to transport and reassemble the Belgian Building in Richmond during WWII and through an era of economic duress and Jim Crow laws. Richmond Mayor L. Douglas Wilder, first African American Governor of Virginia; Vice-Admiral Samuel L. Gravely, Jr., the first African American to achieve the rank of Admiral; and the late Robert L. Vann, U.S. founder of the Pittsburgh Courier Newspaper were some of the University's Illustrious students who emerged during that period.

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