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Reenvisioning Richmond’s Past: Race, Reconciliation, and Public History in the Modern South, 1990–Present

By Marvin T. Chiles

Richmond, Virginia, is more than the former Confederate capital: it is a city seeking to end its complicity with American racism. Nothing encapsulates Richmond’s desire for an inclusive multiracial identity better than the movement to withdraw Confederate monuments from the southern landscape. After national tragedies in Charleston, South Carolina (2015), and Charlottesville, Virginia (2017), southern cities both large and small removed statues that honored Confederate heroes. Richmond half-heartedly joined this movement in the summer of 2017, when Mayor Levar M. Stoney’s ad hoc commission considered the removal of the Jefferson Davis statue, along with the reinterpretation of other Confederate relics, on the city’s famous Monument Avenue. Yet, as statues came down in New Orleans, Baltimore, Austin, Texas, and Durham, North Carolina, by the fall of 2017 Richmonders had not reinterpreted

1 Kevin M. Levin, “What Richmond Has Gotten Right About Interpreting Its Confederate History,” Smithsonian Magazine, May 18, 2017, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/what-richmond-has-gotten-right-about-interpreting-its-confederate-history-180963354. See also Karen L. Cox, No Common Ground: Confederate Monuments and the Ongoing Fight for Racial Justice (Chapel Hill, 2021), esp. 149–67. As a native Richmonder, I first dedicate this project to Richmond and its people—past and present—who use history to fundamentally improve city race relations. Thank you to every Richmonder, public official, and leader of Richmond-based institutions who understood the importance of this project, thus providing me with the interviews and closely kept private collections needed for its completion. I also thank the esteemed Journal of Southern History for being an outlet for this work, as well as the peer reviewers who without a doubt strengthened this essay. Lastly, I thank my adviser Dr. Robert A. Pratt, professor of history at the University of Georgia, as well as mentors Dr. Steven A. Reich, professor of history at James Madison University; Brian J. Daugherity, associate professor of history at Virginia Commonwealth University; and Julian Maxwell Hayter, associate professor of leadership studies at the University of Richmond. Without their guidance and continued support, this essay, and the book of which it will become a part, would not be possible.

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or expelled any Lost Cause statues from their public sphere. The social unrest stemming from the police killing of Black Minneapolis man George Floyd in the summer of 2020, however, compelled the nine members of the Richmond city council to vote unanimously for the removal of the Confederate statues from Monument Avenue. Mayor Stoney carried out most of that plan by defying a court injunction and removing the statue of Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson in July 2020. Soon all of these once hallowed, now controversial relics lay tarnished with spray paint in a water treatment facility just outside the city. By the summer of 2020, support for removing every Confederate statue from the avenue was bipartisan and biracial, whereas just a few years before, removals were nearly unfathomable. This seismic shift in public thought appears on the surface to have been a knee-jerk reaction to national events—a desire to put Richmond in line with the rest of the South and the nation, as many viewed monument removal as a major step to stem the uptick in white supremacist violence since the Barack Obama presidency. However, this article argues that Richmond’s removal of Confederate monuments began in the early 1990s, when a neighborhood organization, the museum community, and business elites aligned on using public history to rid Richmond of its racist identity.

This essay examines archival papers, public records, interviews, and newspapers of the formerly arch-conservative city of Richmond to

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better understand the more recent removal of Confederate monuments. In the process, it argues that the 2020 removals were rooted in previous efforts to divorce the city from its racist heritage. This story begins not on Monument Avenue but in the Near West End Carillon neighborhood. Here, in the early 1990s, a biracial organization called Hope in the Cities (HIC), with the help of the museum community and Black grassroots organizations, used Richmond’s history with slavery to address the persistence of de facto segregation. It marked the first time since the modern civil rights movement that progressive organizations dominated public discussions about race relations and public identity in Richmond. Business and political elites had unsuccessfully used urban revitalization to reshape Richmond’s identity and improve race relations in the 1970s and 1980s; however, they had been more concerned with healing the economy than with mending social divides between Black and white city residents.5

Neighborhood groups, grassroots organizations, and the museum community coordinated efforts to place Black history in Richmond’s public history mainstream, making the city’s public history movement a part of a national reckoning on race in the 1990s. Richmond showcased its evolving race relations and progressive public history shift with the Healing the Heart of America conference in 1993 and the erection of the Arthur Ashe statue on Monument Avenue in 1996. Both events thrust Richmond into the national spotlight, as urban leaders across the country not only attended the conference and celebrated the Ashe statue, but also asked HIC to help them use inclusive public history narratives to solve racial issues in their own cities. As Richmond moved into the twenty-first century—a time thought to be witnessing the flowering of multiculturalism in America—the city government, HIC, grassroots groups, and the museum community began a long campaign to decenter Confederate history from Richmond’s identity, supporting newer public art and institutions that reflected the growing antiracist attitude. Yet, this essay argues, these acts only highlighted the existing hypocrisy between Richmond’s claims to multiculturalism and the remaining vestiges of white supremacy. While Richmond’s public history became more inclusive, local government enacted public policies that maintained systemically racist and classist segregation. The 2020 protests responded to these divergent developments, as activists wished to connect the movement to reconcile the city’s history of

racism with an inclusive public history narrative. In sum, the activism of 2020 was a call to make public history a platform for racial equity in city life, what many saw as the logical conclusion of decades of public history engagement. Finally, this essay makes the claim that modern Richmond is an important nexus for understanding that the long struggle to redefine collective identities is the connective tissue between the recent “national reckonings” on American racism and the removal of Confederate statues.

This article goes against the consensus formed by southern studies scholars about the conflict behind Confederate monuments in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Some historians argue that recent tensions over Confederate monuments reflect a continuum of conflict between Black and white southerners over control of politics, landscape, and identity.6 Other scholars focus on debunking the myths that transformed Confederate history into public memories of valor, pride, and white masculinity.7 In sum, contemporary scholarship portrays public history as a contested terrain between natural enemies. This article, however, argues that public history was much more than that. Instead of casting public history debates as reflections of deeper racial animus, this article shows how public history became a medium for like-minded Blacks and whites to construct newer, more harmonious collective identities. This medium was built by everyday people and institutions investigating the origins of racial hostility with the intention of creating racial harmony. The use of contested histories to overcome the legacy of racism is best seen in Richmond because, as “‘ground zero’ for the Confederacy and subsequently the Lost Cause,” the city has been

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consumed with and by its racial history.\textsuperscript{8} Even with this intimate connection to the past and desire for a better present, progressive Richmonders in the 1990s could not control or foresee the results of the process they started. They wanted to drown out the city’s Lost Cause legacy by embracing the history of the Black freedom struggle. In contrast, in the twenty-first century, voices pushed for the obliteration of Lost Cause memory. This group hoped that monument removal would help deconstruct the systems that allowed for the projection of racial harmony at the expense of racial equity. Calls to remove Confederate statues in 2020 were, as the title of Wes Bellamy’s book about Charlottesville relates, “never about a statue.”\textsuperscript{9} Rather, the impetus came from people resisting the systemic racism left in the rear view by the earlier pursuit of racial reconciliation.

Richmond’s public history movement began in an unlikely place called Oregon Hill, a neighborhood located just off the northern banks of the James River. This historically white residential community was torn in half by suburban flight after World War II. By the 1980s, most residents were not homeowners but renters who worked service and manufacturing jobs, earning, on average, less than $14,000 annually.\textsuperscript{10} This dying inner-city community received an unexpected stimulus when white liberal activists and Black politicians promoted “community-based-efforts for neighborhood housing development through rehabilitation and purchase.”\textsuperscript{11} With the help of federal and private grants, locals purchased, renovated, and resold dilapidated Oregon Hill homes to the working class without profit.\textsuperscript{12} Despite this housing rehabilitation program, Oregon Hill

\textsuperscript{8} Maurantonio, Confederate Exceptionalism, xxii (quotation); Ellen L. Chapman, “Buried Beneath the River City: Investigating an Archaeological Landscape and Its Community Value in Richmond, Virginia” (Ph.D. dissertation, College of William and Mary, 2018); Autumn Rain Duke Barrett, “Honoring the Ancestors: Historical Reclamation and Self-Determined Identities in Richmond and Rio de Janeiro” (Ph.D. dissertation, College of William and Mary, 2014).

\textsuperscript{9} Wes Bellamy, Monumental: It Was Never About a Statue (Hampton, Va., 2019).

\textsuperscript{10} Oregon Hill Summary Tape File 1G, Neighborhood Revitalization Division of the Department of Planning and Community Development, Folder “City of Richmond Neighborhood Statistics, 1980 Census, November 1985,” Box 5, Richmond Renaissance Inc. Papers, M303 (Special Collections and Archives, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Va.; hereinafter cited as VCU).


remained in 1990 “mostly white and middle- to low-income,” said the Richmond *Times-Dispatch*. The reason was simple. Reginald E. Gordon—a current Richmond bureaucrat—remembered that as a youth, “I was told to stay away from Oregon Hill. That is a part of town that is not safe for Black kids; because you know, they’re racist.”

Few Richmonders could have imagined Oregon Hill as a flashpoint for the city’s need to fix race relations. For starters, its residents had long relished being the most outwardly bigoted neighborhood in Richmond. Confederate flags flew high in front of homes along the South Pine Street entrance. A Black police detective remembered a white Oregon Hill gunshot victim telling his partner, “Get these niggers away from me,” when he tried to help. Black sociologist and longtime Richmond resident Rutledge M. Dennis remembered that his friend, a Black bus driver, was ordered to never drive through Oregon Hill because residents allegedly “feared for his safety.” Oregon Hill’s extreme reputation reminded city residents that even though the commonwealth had just elected America’s first Black governor—L. Douglas Wilder—in 1989, Richmond was, in the words of a travel writer, “an enclave of the Old South.” Yet, a Black grandmother named Celestine Edmonds jumped at the chance to own her first home in the summer of 1990. The property was located along South Pine Street in Oregon Hill. Edmonds told the Richmond *Afro-American* that she “had heard about Oregon Hill’s reputation.” Still, Edmonds insisted on becoming a homeowner wherever she could—and that place was Oregon Hill.

Racial violence placed Oregon Hill at the center of Richmond’s attitude change about racial division. One August night in 1990, vandals disrupted Edmonds’s peace of mind with a barrage of “smashed windows, verbal threats, racial epithets, [and] spray-painted KKK letters” on her front door. This attack forced the city of around 200,000 residents (about 50 percent Black and 50 percent white) to confront the
long-known racism festering within its borders. Edmonds told the *Afro-American* about other issues she had experienced since moving into Oregon Hill. Her guests were routinely greeted with cold shoulders and racially insensitive insults. It was not uncommon for white Oregon Hill residents to use derogatory terms, loud enough for Black neighbors to hear. But Edmonds insisted that she “didn’t realize things would get this bad.” The local media directed a flurry of negative attention toward the neighborhood, treating it as a backward outlier in an otherwise harmonious city. Behind the leadership of Marty M. Tapscott—Richmond’s first Black police chief—the local police even launched a public investigation into the other instances of racism in the area. This attention compelled Edmonds’s white neighbors to help repair her damaged home. When asked why they fixed the broken windows and tarnished porch, an unnamed resident claimed that, regardless of race, “we all got to live together.”

Oregon Hill proved that, almost three decades after the modern civil rights movement, Richmond remained a segregated city in body and spirit. The biracial city council responded by removing Confederate symbols from the city flag. This swift decision did not address why Richmond’s racial issues revealed themselves especially at the neighborhood level. City hall officials should have looked toward the Carillon neighborhood as a guide for addressing the problems of Oregon Hill. This mixed-race Near West End community located just two miles from Oregon Hill had not had to repair vandalized homes or remove any Confederate flags from its entrance. Instead, Carillon forged its own path in the 1960s when the city experienced a white mass exodus to the adjacent Henrico and Chesterfield County suburbs. As upwardly mobile Blacks moved into Carillon, many white residents greeted them as neighbors, ensuring that while Richmond’s racial realities infiltrated the neighborhood, racism did not come with it.

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17 Interview with Robert L. Corcoran, March 11, 2019; Interview with Susan Corcoran, May 7, 2019; Interview with Elizabeth L. O’Leary, June 26, 2019; Carillon Neighborhood Historic District, National Park Service National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, prepared...
To city residents, Carillon’s centerpiece was the 240-foot Georgian bell tower built in 1932 to honor the fallen soldiers of World War I. Yet Carillon residents would have agreed that the neighborhood’s heart lay in the colonial-style home at 1103 Sunset Avenue, once occupied by white liberals named Robert and Susan Corcoran. Robert, the son of English dock-workers, and Susan, the daughter of Oxford University professors who sent her to Black public schools in Atlanta during the 1950s, met while working for Moral Re-Armament, a nonprofit, multifaith organization designed to promote peaceful dialogue among racial, ethnic, and national groups. In a decision to bring Moral Re-Armament to Richmond in the 1970s, the newly married couple chose to “purchase a home that could function as a community center as well as a home.” They chose Carillon because it was an oasis of racial integration in a desert of division.18

The Corcorans helped convince Carillon residents to spread their culture of racial harmony throughout the city. They began by hosting several interracial potlucks, barbecues, and block parties after settling into the neighborhood. The most contentious issue at these events was not race but rather Susan’s insistence that someone “please bring a vegetable, salad, or dessert.” When leaving the neighborhood to shop or pay bills, however, the Corcorans confronted the drastic difference in racial attitudes just outside Carillon. Blacks and whites often commended in Carillon. Because of that, other “white folks will not come into your house” in Carillon, a Black friend once told the Corcorans. The couple struggled to find interracial civic groups. Not only was Richmond’s racial divide pervasive, but also the polite silence about it touched almost every facet of city life. Yet there were “enough people, within the community, who had a different vision for Richmond,” Robert later said in an interview. That vision was to make Richmond a city where racial differences did not continue manifesting into segregated neighborhoods, schools, and churches. A few responsive civic groups provided the Corcorans with the names of about fifteen white and Black people who formed Richmond’s branch of Moral Re-Armament. Most of them were


18 Carillon Neighborhood Historic District Registration Form, p. 55; “Richmond—A Model City?,” New World News, January 7, 1978, pp. 1–7; Dialogue at City Hall, June 9, 1989; and Notes from the Monthly Meeting and Potluck Supper, January 5, April 6, May 4, June 1, July 6, and September 15, 1990, all in Folder “Richmond, 1977–1991,” File Cabinet #1, Initiatives of Change Archives (Initiatives of Change USA, Richmond, Va.); Interview with Benjamin P. Campbell, March 12, 2019; Robert Corcoran interview (quotation); Susan Corcoran interview. New World News was a Moral Re-Armament publication that is now out of print. All articles from this publication cited herein can be found in the Initiatives of Change Archives.
college students, housewives, teachers, social workers, and community organizers; and one was Assistant City Manager A. Howe Todd.19

Moral Re-Armament generated interracial harmony among the most influential members of local institutions, but its success was not without turmoil. The Corcorans quickly realized that this motley crew was heavily blinkered with racial division. The Blacks were young and radical; the “predominantly elderly and predominantly conservative” whites “were happy to talk about reconciliation, they weren’t so happy to talk about racism,” Robert remembered. The Corcorans secured funding from Moral Re-Armament to send the Richmond members to Europe, Africa, and Asia to participate in race-related seminars and meetings with foreign leaders in the mid-1980s. Travel abroad created bonds that transcended the color line. Even forty years later Robert recalled the voyage with fondness: “I don’t think we could have done it if we did not have the international experience.”20 Upon their return, public officials, both local and foreign, began attending the Corcorans’ monthly potlucks at 1103 Sunset Avenue.21 Attendees bonded over watching home videos of the foreign travels. The Corcorans put together a compilation of clips they called The Courage to Change. They disseminated this twenty-seven-minute film to other civic and political leaders in Richmond and across the country. It was not long before several organizations in the United States and Europe requested Moral Re-Armament’s help to


21 1103 Sunset Avenue Guest Book, found in the Richmond home of Rob and Susan Corcoran, May 7, 2019.
organize similar interracial coalitions and international trips. By that point, “so many white organizations, churches, as well as individual leaders in the Richmond area wanted to be a part of what we were doing,” Black member, minister, and organizer Paige Chargois recalled.22

Such efforts were furthered by local museum and academic institutions deciding to interpret Black history in the early 1990s.23 Younger Valentine Museum staff, behind the efforts of Frank Jewell, Marie Tyler-McGraw, and Gregg D. Kimball, pushed the older, more conservative board members to include more Black history in exhibits. “Race will remain the most important issue in the area,” and thus “the need to address it should be both implicit and explicit in the museum’s plans,” an internal memo about the 1990s stated.24 In line with a national push toward sharing more social histories about everyday people, and not just heroic tales of elite white men, the Valentine collaborated with renowned historians and other institutions such as the Black History Museum and Cultural Center of Virginia to create several exhibitions and academic works about slavery along the Manchester Docks and Shockoe Slip, Reconstruction and Jim Crow in the Black Richmond neighborhood of Jackson Ward, and the modern civil rights movement downtown.25
Virginia Historical Society and Virginia Museum of Fine Arts also began interpreting Black history.\textsuperscript{26} Even Virginia Commonwealth University, under the direction of white liberal president Eugene P. Trani, and with the help of the Black academic, social worker, and provost Grace E. Harris and scholars in the African American studies program, institutionalized the university’s connection to the Black community through various initiatives.\textsuperscript{27} These actions cultivated a connection between Richmond race relations, history, identity, and the institutions that would, from the early 1990s forward, try to control the city’s public history narrative.

Grounding the white-led museum community’s efforts to interpret Black history were its ties with existing Black grassroots organizations, some of which were big-time players in the local arts scene. For example, in August 1991 the Museum of the Confederacy tried its hand at reconciliatory public history with its first annual “family reunion” festival in Jackson Ward’s Abner Clay Park. The event was designed in conjunction with the museum’s new exhibition, “Before Freedom Came: African-American Life in the Antebellum South,” and featured music, crafts, lectures, performances, and food. The all-white Museum of the Confederacy did not conduct this event on its own; rather, it partnered with groups such as the Elegba Folklore Society (EFS) that had the cultural competency to run such activities.\textsuperscript{28} Founded in 1990 by Black Greensboro, North Carolina, native Janine Bell, the EFS taught interpretive dance in the Richmond area to spread awareness, knowledge, and appreciation for African culture in a city where it was rarely acknowledged. The EFS also provided “cultural history tours” interpreting “unmarked sites in Richmond’s history” and worked with the Richmond and Henrico parks departments to produce musical


\textsuperscript{27}See, for example, Minutes of a Regular Meeting of the Board of Visitors of Virginia Commonwealth University, September 13, 1990, pp. 1–2; January 17, 1991, p. 3; May 17, 1991, p. 4; July 18, 1991, p. 9; November 1, 1991, pp. 6–7; and May 21, 1993, pp. 9–10, VCU Board of Visitors Minutes (VCU Libraries Digital Collections), https://digital.library.vcu.edu/islandora/object/vcu%3Abob; and “Some Future Directions,” 1993, Folder “Reports 92–94,” File Cabinet #1, Initiatives of Change Archives.

dramas and pop-up art galleries about Richmond’s antebellum slave market. Influencing Bell and the EFS was the Ezibu Muntu dance society, an African dance group founded at Virginia Commonwealth University in 1973. Seeing this cultural shift toward interpreting Black history, the leadership at the Museum of the Confederacy, which, at the time, was seen as anti-Black, reached out to Bell to conduct community programs about Black history and culture. The Down Home Family Reunion evolved into an event that netted around 25,000 visitors per year, and the partnership between the EFS and the Museum of the Confederacy helped crystallize and disseminate the idea that Richmond could begin shedding its racist identity through reforming its once white supremacist public history scene.29

The concerted effort by local institutions to promote more Black history compelled Black and white liberals to portray Richmond as a city using history to overcome its racist culture. By 1993, Moral Re-Armament had evolved into Hope in the Cities, a grassroots organization designed to convert Richmond’s new progressive energy into a sustainable movement for racial reconciliation. With Black mayor Walter T. Kenney Sr., a Black minister named Sylvester Turner, a white clergyman named Benjamin P. Campbell, and others at the helm, HIC sponsored several weekend forums with Black and white community leaders in the winter of 1992 and spring of 1993. The group wanted to devise the best way to promote Richmond’s recent wave of racial liberalism.30 These forums resulted in the Healing the Heart of America conference in June 1993. The conference’s mission was to “begin the process of healing for the nation, through acts of repentance and forgiveness in the setting of the former capital of the Confederacy.” Between June 16 and 20, more than 1,500 people from all over the world, including fifty-six mayors of American cities, flooded Richmond to hear from speakers, attend seminars, see talent shows, and participate in


workshops about using contested histories to promote racial healing (Figure 1). HIC wished to establish Richmond as the “gateway to the spirit of healing and partnership that America needs,” said Mayor Kenney.³¹

The conference’s pièce de résistance was a walking tour through Richmond’s untold history (Figure 2). Although the museum community had already begun seriously exploring and embracing the city’s Black history, the public history narrative in general was far from inclusive. As it stood, Richmond’s history began at St. John’s Church in the East End, where American founding father Patrick Henry had uttered the iconic phrase, “Give me liberty or give me death.” That narrative proceeded west toward the factories along Tobacco Row, past the Tredegar Iron Works (nicknamed the Ironmaker to the Confederacy), into Capitol Square (designed by Thomas Jefferson), to Hollywood Cemetery, St. Paul’s Episcopal Church (nicknamed the Cathedral of the Confederacy), and the Museum of the Confederacy (formerly the Confederate White House), and ending along Monument Avenue, where Confederate heroes and the Lost Cause were minted into legend with grand statues. From this perspective, Richmond’s history, like U. B. Phillips’s assessment of southern history, was the story of white supremacy.32

It appeared to all that the city did not want Black history to be enshrined in its landscape and public memory. That was, until Black Richmond public school teacher Nancy Jo Taylor convinced HIC to

create a walking tour of the city’s unmarked sites where slavery and racism began. The tour began on 28th Street, where Chief Powhatan and his Indian federation lost control over the land that later became the city of Richmond. The tour deviated south toward the Manchester Slave Docks, where many Black Africans entered lifelong servitude. It was in this area that a slave named Gabriel may have conspired to search for his liberty, but it is unknown where he ultimately found his death. The tour proceeded less than five blocks northwest toward the site where the Lumpkin Slave Jail (also known as the Devil’s Half Acre) once stood (Figure 3). While academic historians and the museum community worked to push this narrative into the mainstream, it was HIC and its Healing the Heart of America conference that helped many locals and others see Richmond’s history as rooted in the original sin of slavery, in its successor, Jim Crow, and in the corollary of mythmaking that long masqueraded as public history.33 The success of the Unity Walk and the Healing the Heart of America conference inspired the Richmond city council and the museum community to convert the walking tour’s path into an official “slave trail” maintained by the city.34 To this day, this trail is advertised among the plethora of sites for tourists to see while visiting Richmond.

33 Interview with Benjamin Campbell, March 14, 2019; Barrett, “Honoring the Ancestors,” 424–40.
Hope in the Cities began a public discussion about racism that touched nearly every aspect of civic culture and identity. After the 1993 conference, many Richmonders were, as one white minister bluntly stated, “ask[ing] themselves whether they were racially prejudiced or not.” This question reverberated when the city government decided to put a statue of Richmond native Arthur R. Ashe Jr. along Monument Avenue shortly after his death, which happened a few months before the 1993 conference. While the city collectively mourned the loss of the tennis great and humanitarian, Ashe’s nonprofit organization Virginia Heroes commissioned a statue that portrayed him standing tall and doing what made him famous: playing tennis and giving back to children. The Ashe memorial fit into what Dell Upton calls the “great leader monument” phase of civil rights statues, in which the person’s likeness was carved into stone or metal to celebrate their life, and not to mourn their death. The city council organized a site committee to search for an appropriate location for the statue. Months of deliberation led the committee to select Monument Avenue. Adding to Monument Avenue was not a novel idea; in 1978 local white activist Edward H. Peeples suggested that since “Richmonders are not yet prepared to take down the Confederate icons on Monument Ave. and elsewhere in the city, then we should at the very least erect a series of new statues along this busy and widely acclaimed boulevard.” While nearly no one was seriously discussing any additions to the avenue in the late 1970s, many civic leaders felt that by the 1990s Richmond was ready to add a Black face to its hallowed ground. The motive behind the decision was quite clear: “Officials in a medium-size southern city dotted with monuments to Confederate War heroes decide[d] to erect a statue aimed at

35 Campbell interview, March 14, 2019 (quotation); National Hope in the Cities Coalition, December 1993, Newsletters and Releases Scrapbook, File Cabinet #4, Initiatives of Change Archives. For the positive responses about the conference, see Folder “1993 Conference,” and Folder “Unity Walk/Slave Walk,” both in File Cabinet #1, Initiatives of Change Archives.
37 Upton, What Can and Can’t Be Said, 3.
illustrating the city’s history beyond the Civil War and, they hope[d], prompting racial healing.” Documentary evidence from the time validated this assessment; as the Washington Post noted, “There was virtually no protest” among those who made the decision.39

Richmonders were well aware that Monument Avenue was the sacred ground of white supremacy. For most of Richmond’s history, Monument Avenue—known to some as the Confederate Valhalla—was a dirt road leading to the rural hinterlands of Henrico County. That changed in the late 1880s when local white elites sought to enshrine Richmond among the nation’s elite cities by creating the grand Monument Avenue. While streetcar lines and mansions eventually made it Richmond’s most fashionable place to live, its Confederate statues made Monument Avenue the most important place to be. Erected in 1890, the Robert E. Lee statue solidified the mythical Lost Cause narrative that the Civil War was a northern attack on southern agrarianism, and not the institution of slavery. Over the next forty years, groups of former Confederate soldiers and sympathizers helped erect statues to honor J. E. B. Stuart and Jefferson Davis (1907), Stonewall Jackson (1919), and Matthew Fontaine Maury (1929). Richmond became “the Mecca of the Lost Cause, and Monument [Avenue] was the sacred road to it,” a prominent southern historian has written. Monument Avenue was also the cathedral and insignia of Blacks being disfranchised and segregated by Jim Crow laws.40 When the statues went up, Black Richmonders lost their right to vote and access to equal education and public accommodations. They were not allowed to live along the avenue until after the modern civil rights movement was well underway. Thus, for most of Richmond’s history, the only Black people seen in the Monument


Avenue neighborhood were cooks, maids, butlers, and other service workers.41 Once the densest concentration of Confederate statues in America, Monument Avenue helped ingrain the racial politics of the Lost Cause so deeply into the city that many felt that white supremacy was natural and uncontested.

Black opposition to Monument Avenue’s racist image evolved over time. Upon the coronation of the Lee statue in 1887, Black councilmen voted against allocating public funds toward its construction. One of those men, Richmond Planet editor John Mitchell Jr., predicted that “should the time come,” the Black hands who reluctantly erected the monument “will be there to take it down.” White state senator Edward E. Willey helped the avenue remain a symbol of white supremacy in a demographically changing Richmond when he warned the Virginia legislature in 1968 that “if certain elements in the City of Richmond were to take over the city government they would tear down all the monuments on Monument Avenue.” Local leadership, both the existing whites and incoming Blacks, calmed his fears. Black Richmonders did not seek to remove the statues, and the Lee statue eventually became the property of the overwhelmingly conservative white state legislature. By the 1990s, no one was raising the issue of removing the statues. Rather, some Black Monument Avenue residents called for the addition of Black heroes to the strip. They felt, as the Washington Post stated, that “black achievers would be a potent symbol of racial progress and healing” in Richmond. Measures to add Black statues failed in the biracial city council in 1991, leading one white council member to later admit, “We’re dealing with issues here . . . that are really at the core of Richmond’s identity.”42

The outrage over the site committee’s selection revealed that many white Richmonders did not want to see Black and civil rights history held in the same regard as Confederate memory. Ashe’s longtime friend and local business executive Tom Chewning claimed that Virginia Heroes carefully presented the statue as an addition to the avenue, and not as a “big frontal assault on the Confederate past.” Yet hundreds of white residents called city hall in protest in the hours after the announced site selection became public. The Times-Dispatch also worked against

41 Turner interview.
the site committee and became the bullhorn of opposition. The newspaper printed letters and polls that framed the dissent as racially neutral. “The African-American community is divided. The white community is divided,” city councilman Timothy M. Kaine stated. The reality was that most whites, for one reason or another, did not want to see a Black man on Monument Avenue. The few Black dissenters felt that Ashe—a champion of human equality—was too honorable to share space beside men who had defended slavery. Upon the initial announcement, Black city manager Robert C. Bobb optimistically claimed, “Richmond is changing. We have changed . . . . It does reflect that we’re a city for all the people . . . . It’s more than symbolic. It’s real.” Yet opposition to the Ashe statue after the announcement, well intended or not, proved true the *Afro-American*’s assessment: while “phrases such as racial harmony and healing of the past floated around the city like pollen, now the reality [is] that the city is far from healed or harmonic.”

In gaining control of the issue, the city government aided previous efforts by the museum community and HIC to reform Richmond’s racist identity with public history. The city council called a public hearing on July 17, 1995, to decide the Ashe statue’s placement once and for all. The decision had already been made before the hearing, however. According to Black councilwoman Viola O. Baskerville, spirited debate with the site committee convinced the city council members to ignore the controversy and place the Ashe statue along Monument Avenue. An hour later, 118 residents and media representatives from across the nation entered the council chambers and debated the “essential questions of our collective identity,” said Black Richmond mayor Leonidas B. Young. Six hours of debate culminated in a 7-0 decision (with one member abstaining and one absent) in favor of erecting the statue along

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43 Interview with Tom Chewning, May 10, 2019.
45 Chewning interview; Interview with Viola Baskerville, July 28, 2019; Campbell interviews, March 12 and 14, 2019; Interview with John Moeser, March 11, 2019; Turner interview; Interview with Edward Peeples, June 24, 2019; Interview with Terry Drumheller, July 23, 2019; Interview with William Mason, July 23, 2019; Martin interview; Robert Corcoran interview.
Monument Avenue.47 As Mayor Young said, “No American city with the racial and economic composition of Richmond, [has] made the extraordinary strides toward racial harmony that we have.” The hyperbole reflected the general sense of racial goodwill created by the decision. A Black friend of Tom Chewning’s assured him that the Ashe statue told Black Richmonders that now, “We belong in all of the city.”48

The siting of the Ashe statue placed Richmond’s public history movement on a national platform, as local progressives helped other cities attempt to shed their own racist identities by facing tumultuous histories. Spearheading this national push was Hope in the Cities. HIC quietly supported the Ashe statue placement, but Richmond’s trouble with erecting it encouraged members to play a more direct role in racial affairs. In the winter of 1996, HIC began a national movement named the Call to Community. It provided “a set of ground rules to which elected officials, business, and community leaders will commit themselves and agree” to heal communities through exploring painful racial histories. Through structured dialogue sessions, HIC helped grassroots organizations, business leaders, and political elites discuss current racial issues as the products of historical patterns of inequality that required change. The first Call to Community began with a local television series in Richmond, hosted by the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts and funded by a few wealthy white donors. Its success encouraged HIC that “the Richmond model of honest dialogue and healing of racial history might be replicated in other cities in various parts of the U.S.” Moreover, HIC envisioned Richmond becoming the seat of a national push to use history to reconcile contemporary racial wounds.49

Compelling HIC to move beyond Richmond’s city limits was the emerging fracture in America’s major metropolitan areas. Presidential candidate


49 Rob Corcoran to John Charles Thomas, January 5, 1995 (first quotation); Rob Corcoran to Melvin Law, n.d.; and “A Call to Community Position Paper,” February 22, 1996 (second quotation), all in Folder “A Call to Community,” File Cabinet #1, Initiatives of Change Archives.
William J. Clinton called for “a spirit of genuine community” in 1992 because the nation was in the middle of an existential crisis about the persistence of racism. On one hand, the racial achievement and opportunity gap that had long divided Black and white Americans was rapidly closing. Rates of interracial families, friendships, neighborhoods, schools, social clubs, and workplaces also reached never before seen heights. Yet, on the other, racially charged incidents, such as the police assault of Rodney King, the officers’ acquittal, and the subsequent Los Angeles riots in 1992; the O. J. Simpson case in 1995; and the arson committed against 225 Black churches beginning in 1996 (one of them in Richmond’s neighbor Chesterfield County), generated a national inquiry into American race relations. Parallel to these events was a resegregation of the white middle class as they moved out of diverse urban and suburban areas and into racially exclusive exurban communities. Scholars and polls found that many whites adopted a color-blind mentality, seeing racism as both a thing of the past and a talking point for grifters seeking political power. Many Blacks argued that recent events, along with persistent educational and economic disparities, proved America to be just the opposite. “In my lifetime, race relations are as bad as I have ever seen them,” said Calvin O. Butts, pastor of


Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, New York. Many concluded that, by the 1990s, Black and white Americans engaged in less frequent non-forced (that is, outside work and school) contact than at any point since the 1960s.53

HIC’s Call to Community required the cooperation of grassroots and elite actors. In May 1996, HIC contacted more than one hundred grassroots, local, and state leaders from around the country who had attended the Healing the Heart of America conference in 1993. Most of them agreed to attend the National Call to Community meeting in Washington, D.C., in the fall.54 At that meeting, local leaders vied for HIC to help them create forums, symposia, and interracial dialogues about overcoming racial tensions. The attendees and HIC had separate interests that the Call to Community helped align. The Washington meeting confirmed HIC’s desire to make “Richmond . . . . set the national standard on public conversations.” The sheer number of requests for HIC’s assistance showed that many urbanites saw race as “America’s Achilles heel.” As Kurt Schmoke, Baltimore’s first Black mayor, wrote in his official request, “It is the underlying issue that touches most other domestic issues, from crime to welfare.”55 Thus, HIC became a lifeline for these community leaders and public officials; and for HIC, various localities became stepping stones to create a national conversation about race, with Richmond at the helm. While HIC would have liked to be everywhere at once, the organization branched off into twelve cities that represented every region in the nation. Funding these endeavors were the localities soliciting their services, Richmond-based businesses, and the Kellogg Foundation.56

The highly optimistic HIC was quickly humbled by the racial realities the group confronted in other cities. As a result, the HIC members


55 Rob Corcoran to Hope in Cities Steering Committee, February 9, 1995, Folder “Call to Community and WCVE Channel 23” (first quotation); and Kurt Schmoke to Fellow Mayors, January 1996, Folder “A Call to Community” (second and third quotations), both in File Cabinet #1, Initiatives of Change Archives.

who were interviewed for this project remained tight-lipped about the Call to Community. Their silence and the archival record, which was made available to this author at their good graces, spoke volumes about "the challenge of overcoming deep-seated racial hurts and mistrust" in places that were "still suffering the trauma of their racial history," as Robert Corcoran wrote in a project summary. While each place had its own distinct flavor, all suffered from an insurmountable racial divide rooted in white suburban flight and the denial of racism in the present. Plainspoken Black member Paige Chargois uttered truth to life when stating in an interview, "No matter where we went, it was almost exactly the same."57

In northeastern cities, the urban/suburban divide buttressed and reflected a psychological rift that made meaningful dialogue all but impossible. Many whites had clustered in the suburbs, while Blacks and Latinos remained in cash-strapped, underserved inner cities. HIC and its host groups (Philadelphia Chapter of Physicians of Social Responsibility, Camden Hope in the Cities, and Healing the Heart of Hartford) wished to hold dialogues about local history, forgiveness, and reconciliation in areas that bordered the all-white suburbs. However, "the media practically ignores these activities and white folks do not normally join in," said University of Hartford professor Ian Mayo-Smith.58 Whites almost never showed up to scheduled dialogues and workshops, while Blacks almost always came seeking racial justice. Black attendees used meetings as platforms to express discontent with white suburban flight, racial segregation in public schools, and access to jobs.59 Its activist bent led Hope in the Cities to remind its partners, "A Call to Community should remain the

philosophical base from which HIC and local affiliates operate. It contains the essential framework for the honest conversation. Any program which draws on the Hope in the Cities name needs to be clearly rooted in this approach. I am only saying this because there are so many so-called dialogue and race related efforts going on right now, that it’s important to be clear where we stand.”\textsuperscript{60} This stance, along with poor turnouts, left many “very skeptical as to whether there was really any hope for the cities,” said Mayo-Smith.\textsuperscript{61} The northeastern project ended before the others, with the least amount of progress.

HIC found that beyond the traditional Black/white dichotomy, racial relations were just as strenuous. In Los Angeles, Pasadena, and Anaheim, California, and in Portland, Oregon, loose coalitions of ministers, academics, and social workers sought to “move beyond the black/white paradigm” and address racial strife more broadly.\textsuperscript{62} They found, however, a frontier of long-misunderstood animosity between nonwhite ethnic groups. Blacks, Latinos, and Asians shared residential space in California’s and Oregon’s inner cities. But the dislike between these groups rivaled their general disdain for white suburbanites.\textsuperscript{63} Even though the minorities willing to reconcile their historical discontent were “Good people,” there was “much confusion. There is a surprising lack of connection,” an HIC operative said. Another agreed: “There is a diversity, geographical breadth and lack of pragmatic focus that I am sensing here,” that worked against any real momentum.\textsuperscript{64} Although HIC achieved very little in California, the Portland trip led to January 25 being named an official state-sponsored Day of Acknowledgment for Oregon’s long history of anti-Black racism. The acknowledgment was followed by the inclusion of Black history into various school districts’ curricula. These strides were eventually undermined as “many

\textsuperscript{60}Rob Corcoran to Joyce Hamilton, March 11, 1998, Folder “Hartford, CT”; Rob Corcoran to Randy Ross-Ganguly, September 16, 1998 (quotation), and September 22, 1998, Folder “Camden, NJ,” all in File Cabinet #1, Initiatives of Change Archives.
\textsuperscript{61}Ian Mayo-Smith to Rob Corcoran, June 7, 1995, Folder “Hartford CT,” File Cabinet #1, Initiatives of Change Archives.
\textsuperscript{62}Rob Corcoran to Patrick McNamara, November 3, 1998, Folder “Los Angeles, CA”; and An Honest Conversation on Race, Reconciliation, and Responsibility at Harrison Hall, November 1–2, 1997 (quotation), Folder “Oregon, 1997–1999, Portland, OR,” both in File Cabinet #1, Initiatives of Change Archives.
\textsuperscript{64}A. Hasani Perry to Rob Corcoran, November 20, 2003; Notes on West Coast Visits, April 29–May 9, 2004 (first and second quotations); Patrick McNamara to Rob Corcoran, October 23, 1998; Undated Notes from Los Angeles; and Los Angeles Team (Jane Wax and Peter Kipp) to Rob Corcoran, March 29, 1995, all in Folder “Los Angeles, CA,” File Cabinet #1, Initiatives of Change Archives; Reflections on the Workshop and the Survey, June 1997 (third quotation), Folder “Natchez, MS,” File Cabinet #1, Initiatives of Change Archives.
whites seem to think that there is no real racism problem.” As a result, “blacks are doubtful that dialoging will accomplish much,” HIC recorded.65 As Black residents asked for programs and policies to better integrate Portland’s economy and collective identity, whites resisted. Oregon had no real history of slavery and Jim Crow, so its white populace felt little need for reconciliatory programs. After a while, white and Black Portlanders lost interest in working with each other under HIC’s direction.66

The failures in the Midwest stemmed from its being home to America’s most racially divided cities. From Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to the Twin Cities of Minnesota, HIC worked with fifty to sixty non-profit organizations that conducted “Forgiveness Ceremonies” and dialogues about the history of racism. Yet these places “did not seem to share a common vision.” HIC found that “there was not a consensus that the focus should be on racial issues.”67 Black city manager Valerie A. Lemmie connected the business communities and thirty-four civil rights agencies in both Dayton and Cincinnati, Ohio, to “improve race relations by 2003.” The plan was to see if “the Richmond experience could be replicated in some way” in both places.68 Unfortunately, progressives held little sway over the large “Appalachian” white community (both wealthy and middle-class) who wanted little to do

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68 Robert E. Jones to Hope in the Cities, April 15, 1994, Folder “Dayton, OH”; Robert Webb to Rob Corcoran, November 3, 1994; Robert E. Jones to Donald Loughman, June 9, 1994; and Geoffrey Pugh to Rob Corcoran, June 22, 1994 (quotations), all in Folder “Cincinnati, OH,” File Cabinet #1, Initiatives of Change Archives; Marjorie E. Loyacano, Margaret Peters, and Fred Bartenstein, A History of Race Relations in the Miami Valley: A Brief Overview (Dayton, Ohio, 2002). Lemmie was the city manager first of Dayton, and then of Cincinnati. Ironically, she was the city manager in each place at the time that Hope in the Cities came to Ohio.
with upwardly mobile and working-class Black residents. HIC held several conferences and walks through history, but whites rarely attended. Their absence represented “an acute state of denial,” as “[white] people define racism so narrowly,” a Black Cincinnati executive stated. “If they are not calling people niggers, they think they are not racist,” he clarified. Hence, dialoguing, forgiveness, and “tackling every aspect of the city life: drug and alcohol addictions, homelessness, unemployment and underemployment, teen pregnancy and abortions, divorce, racial division [and] violence” fell on the shoulders of Black urbanites and the white business elite. No one could deny that while the perception of racial harmony ruled the day, “underlying race relations are bad,” said Lemmie, and there was little reason to hope for change in the near future.

If HIC should have been successful anywhere, it was in the South, a region largely defined by its folkways. Southern cities had several grassroots organizations that, as leaders in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, stated, “came together to try and figure out ways to break down existing racial barriers and improve the racial climate.” The reality was that for every metropolitan city such as Atlanta, Charlotte, and Houston, where racially harmonious boosterism overshadowed the existence of racial dis-integration, there were a hundred small cities where the removal of Jim Crow had not changed race relations very much. Each place HIC went faced a similar situation. Disconnected

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71 Rob Corcoran to Geoffrey Pugh, December 20, 1994 (first, second, and third quotations); Geoffrey Pugh to Rob Corcoran, June 22, 1994 (fourth quotation); Rob Corcoran to Geoffrey Pugh, February 9, 1995; and Robert Webb to Robert Wehling, March 11, 2001, all in Folder “Cincinnati, OH,” File Cabinet #1, Initiatives of Change Archives.


73 A Report by Common Ground of Rocky Mount, NC, n.d. (quotation); and Rob Corcoran to Yusuf Abdus-Salaam, October 7, 1998, both in Folder “Rocky Mount, NC,” File Cabinet #1, Initiatives of Change Archives.
whites owned a disproportionate amount of wealth, and social-minded Blacks shared the largest burden of poverty. Because of the strong attachment and understanding of regional history, and the familial, borderline paternalist relationships between whites and Blacks, white southerners were the most receptive to the idea of racial reckonings. But when Black southerners wanted to convert dialogues about slavery and Jim Crow into policies that would “go deep enough to result in institutional as well as attitude change,” such as removing Confederate symbols from the landscape, depopulating segregationist academies, and combining church congregations, whites were, like everywhere else, very resistant. The few whites who were willing to change often confronted Blacks who would not accept their opinions about racial issues. By the early 2000s, a Hope in the Cities representative said sadly, “The main impression right now is that HIC is stalled out” in the South. HIC’s best efforts primarily manifested as interracial dialogues


75 S. W. Rawls Jr. to Rob Corcoran, September 17, 2001; Franklin Community Relations Group, A Workshop Presented by Hope in the Cities, April 27, 2002; Ann Jersey to Sol Rawls, September 17, 2002; and Proposal Outline: The Franklin Community Relations Group, April 2002, all in Folder “Franklin, VA,” File Cabinet #1, Initiatives of Change Archives; Natchez, Mississippi, Facilitator Training Confidential, June 11–13, 1999; Rob Corcoran to Mayor Larry L. Brown, January 31, 1997; Rob Corcoran to Frances Trosclair, March 27, 1997; Response to Unification Committee Report, February 5, 1998; Unification Committee, March 2, 1998; and Report to Hope in the Cities Board by Rob Corcoran, Consultation in Natchez, June 11–13, 1998, all in Folder “Natchez, MS,” File Cabinet #1, Initiatives of Change Archives.


77 Rebecca Davis to Robert Corcoran and Cricket White, January 30, 1999; and Selma, Alabama Training/Blessed Sunday Weekend, March 4–8, 1999, both in Folder “Selma, AL”; Unification Committee Report, January 26, 1998; Unification Committee, Chamber of Commerce, February 6, 2000; Response to Unification Committee Report, February 5, 1998; and Shirley Wheatley to Rob Corcoran, October 24, 2000, in Folder “Natchez, MS,” all in File Cabinet #1, Initiatives of Change Archives.

78 Confidential Report on Selma, Alabama Trip, October 25–30, 1999, Folder “Selma, AL” (quotation); Cricket White to Rob Corcoran, October 17, 1999, Folder “Selma, AL”; and Rob Corcoran to Frances Trosclair, January 19, 1999, Folder “Natchez, MS,” all in File Cabinet #1, Initiatives of Change Archives.
and public history events. In some places, like New Orleans, Norfolk, and Baltimore, they resulted in less than that.

The Call to Community died its final death at the White House. In 1997 President Bill Clinton reached out to HIC for help to start his own “Initiative on Race.” Compelling his support of HIC’s Call to Community—“regarded as one of the most effective models in a national movement”—was his desire to reshape the narrative about his administration’s record on race. Clinton held controversial positions that made him appear racist, such as condemning the Los Angeles riots in 1992, refusing to support Lani Guinier for U.S. assistant attorney general in 1993, and supporting the infamous Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, also known as the Three Strikes Law or the ’94 Crime Bill. Executive Order 13050 established a commission of seven scholars, led by Black historian John Hope Franklin, that conducted nationally broadcast town hall meetings about race. HIC facilitated several of these discussions, but many devolved due to tensions over reparations and affirmative action. The commission’s final report, titled One America Dialogue Guide: Conducting a Discussion on Race, however,
argued that HIC’s dialogue model was the best method for establishing racial harmony moving into the twenty-first century. Critics chided the lack of policy prescription, but Clinton’s cosmetic attempt to heal race relations centered Richmond’s dialogue culture in the national conversation about race in the late twentieth century. Those involved wished that Clinton’s hand in the national movement would lead to federal legislation against racial discrimination in housing and education. Clinton’s scandal with his intern Monica Lewinsky stalled all momentum in that direction. With that, racial reconciliation was no longer on the White House agenda for the new century.

As Richmond inched closer to the present, and as the national reckoning on race merely exposed, but did not heal, racial animus in the city, local progressives had to choose which history represented their cultural values. Placing the Arthur Ashe statue along Monument Avenue was a compromise between the Lost Cause and the modern civil rights movement. Yet the national bewilderment about racism pushed local leadership to sacrifice Lost Cause veneration in the pursuit of a newer multicultural identity. This sacrifice helped HIC’s efforts because the organization was, by the early 2000s, an outward-facing institution maintaining a national antiracism network from a city whose landscape reflected its own sickness of racial inequity and division. The suburbs in Chesterfield and Henrico Counties were majority-white and affluent; the inner city was largely Black, working-class or underclass; empty storefronts and homes blighted the downtown area; and many decaying neighborhoods were filled with more debris than actual people.


In spite of these realities, city leaders continued using history to promote a racially diverse and inclusive image of the Richmond area.

Representing the museum and business communities, the Richmond Riverfront Development Corporation (RRDC) and Richmond Historic Riverfront Foundation (RHRF) put the city’s tumultuous history on display with the Canal Walk, a new outdoor museum opened along the recently restored Kanawha Canal in the summer of 1999. The new city attraction featured almost thirty murals depicting a diverse cast of Richmonders (both Black and white) representing the city’s transition from the seventeenth century to the present. This project was part of a newer corporate investment in changing the city’s public history image. Instead of attracting tourism and capital investment based on its whiteness—as seen with the Confederate history along Monument Avenue—city and business leaders marketed Richmond’s diversity as worthy of their financial and personal backing.

Richmond’s Canal Walk project fell in line with a regional shift toward racially inclusive heritage tourism. Museum communities and local governments in Memphis, Atlanta, Charleston, Charlotte, Savannah, Birmingham, and New Orleans began adding stories about slavery and Jim Crow into history tours that had previously discussed only the lives and property of planter elites. Historians find that this shift was not so much about morality as it was a commodifiable form of reconciliation, marketing southern cities as great places to live, work, and visit. While Richmond fell neatly within this regional development, the Canal Walk also reflected the growing progressive racial attitude among local institutions to define Richmond by its desire to celebrate its growing multiculturalism, and not its past racial discrimination.

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The Canal Walk’s mission to juxtapose Confederate and civil rights history was controversial. Black city councilman and longtime civil rights advocate Sa’ad El-Amin called for a Black boycott of the Canal Walk’s grand opening. His stance came after the Times-Dispatch showed the mural of former Confederate general Robert E. Lee a few days before the June 4, 1999, grand opening. “We got what we wanted. The mural’s coming down,” El-Amin told protesters after a meeting with the RRDC and the RHRF. The local chapter of the Sons of Confederate Veterans responded by draping a large Confederate flag over the canals and chanting, “We want Lee,” during the opening festivities. The swiftness with which the mural was removed, as well as the minor resistance to its removal—in Richmond no less—illuminated the point raised by the Times-Dispatch: “The general might have commanded the Army of Northern Virginia during the Civil War, but he doesn’t command the respect of many . . . Richmond residents.”

Popular support for restoring the Lee mural reflected a public desire to demystify and disempower the Lost Cause in Richmond. The Canal Walk drama invigorated a public debate about the role of Confederate history in a racially progressing South. Virginia governor George Allen, and later Governor James S. Gilmore III, came under fire from the local branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People over acknowledging Confederate History Month in the late 1990s. The incidents made Virginians in general, and Richmonders in particular, appear to be backward-facing bigots in spite of Richmond progressives’ being at the forefront of both local and national racial issues. Yet both white and Black Richmonders disliked the removal of the Lee mural on Canal Walk. “‘We can’t erase him from the history books,’” one Black Richmonder told the Times-Dispatch. He went on to say that “when former victims would have been making a show of respect . . .”

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turn around and victimize their enemies, ‘They become just like those they accuse.’” While white racists used Lee’s image to crystallize the Lost Cause and Jim Crow era, some Richmonders sought to renegotiate the relationship between Confederate history and city identity. The Lost Cause no longer defined them; rather, it showed how far they had progressed past overt racism. “The mural is about Richmond and the Civil War. How can you talk about the Civil War without Lee?” Virginia State University historian Edgar Toppin asked. Echoing this sentiment was moderate white Richmond mayor Timothy Kaine, who told the press, “Much of our history is not pleasant.” But to understand it and Richmonders more broadly, Kaine said, “You can’t whitewash it.” Even former Virginia governor L. Douglas Wilder argued, “There is a place for Robert E. Lee on the wall.” That place, however, was to represent that Richmond was no longer a racist city.

The decision to restore the mural confirmed public support for the agenda of demystifying and disempowering Lost Cause history. The RHRF organized a nineteen-member biracial committee to review all of the murals. Its goal was to select the images that best displayed the city’s history and current identity. El-Amin represented the minority of Black and white Richmonders who wished to keep Lee’s image off this new piece of public history. However, Black and white representatives from the museum and business communities—many of whom were affiliated with HIC—outvoted El-Amin and elected to place the image of Lee back on the floodwall. The committee members went a step further by using the *Times-Dispatch* and citywide dialogues to judge the public’s interests and desires about how the Canal Walk should look, and which murals should represent Richmond. The positive emails, letters, and phone calls from Blacks and whites prompted the RRDC, the RHRF, and the city council to place the Lee image back on the floodwall in November 1999. “I think we needed balance, and I think we achieved a balance,” one committee member said in relief after the public relations disaster.


The Canal Walk incident pushed members of the museum community to marginalize Richmond’s Confederate history through reinterpreting the Civil War in a new museum. Shortly after the Canal Walk drama, many, like H. Alexander Wise Jr., a former director of the Virginia Department of Historic Resources, questioned why “Richmond always seems to trip over itself in matters of race and the Civil War, in controversies ranging from the placement of the Arthur Ashe statue on Monument Avenue to hanging Robert E. Lee’s mural on the floodwall.” The former chair of Richmond Renaissance concurred, writing in a *Times-Dispatch* op-ed, “Is Richmond’s Civil War history holding us back? No, but our approach to it is.” A coalition of prominent Civil War historians, local museums, corporate leaders, and community activists came together to erect the Tredegar National Civil War Museum—later renamed the American Civil War Museum—at the former Tredegar Iron Works factory along the James River. The museum’s mission and site selection were intentionally designed by participating business, political, and museum leaders, as Wise claimed, “to put the Civil War in its place in Richmond, to put the conflict behind us, and to remove blight from the city’s reputation.”

In seeking to tell a “complete” story of the Civil War, this successful project even elicited support from the Museum of the Confederacy—a known propagandizer of Lost Cause mythology. At the new museum’s dedication on October 6, 2006, HIC’s Benjamin

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Campbell prayed that the museum would be “a place of hope” and reconciliation for the city, the South, and the nation.97 Richmond was long the place where myth and racism created the Lost Cause, which was used to justify Jim Crow segregation. The new museum allowed the city to push a more reconstructed narrative that called for racial harmony in the new century.

The American Civil War Museum precipitated a massive shift toward identifying Richmond by its history of civil and human rights.98 In 1990, famous local author and longtime newspaper editor Virginius Dabney reiterated that “Richmond has a special mystique, and is one of only about a half-dozen American cities of which this can be said. If there is a single explanation for this above all others, it is that Richmond was the capital of the Confederacy, the citadel defended for four years against invading armies. Once this mystique is gone, Richmond will be just another city.”99 That omen proved correct as the museum community pushed Richmond further toward the American mainstream with the erection of monuments that commemorated the lives of the enslaved above the men who held them captive.

The American Civil War Museum and the Virginia Historical Society partnered to erect a statue of Abraham Lincoln and his son Tad along the Canal Walk in 2003.100 HIC member and Black city councilwoman Delores L. McQuinn—who was also the longtime chair of the Richmond Slave Trail Commission—worked closely with Hope in the Cities to erect the Slavery Reconciliation Statue along the James River in 2007.101

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97 Gary Robertson, “Civil War Site: ‘Place of Hope,’” Richmond Times-Dispatch, October 7, 2006, p. B3 (quotation); Coleman interview; Maurantonio, Confederate Exceptionalism, 1.
The following year, the Virginia legislature accepted the Virginia Civil Rights Memorial: a privately financed ($2.6 million) series of statues honoring Black attorneys Oliver White Hill Sr. and Spottswood W. Robinson III, along with the Prince Edward County children who boycotted segregated Virginia schools in 1951. The Richmond city council commissioned a statue in honor of Maggie Lena Walker in 2010. Six years later, it sat along downtown’s East Broad and North Adams Streets. The uplift of civil rights monuments, while Confederate history was being confined to and reinterpreted for the public in a museum, effectively put Richmond in line with other southern cities that, like Richmond, were erecting “public expressions of reconciliation” in the new century. “I . . . have interest in racial reconciliation, which I think is a major focus and underlying motivation for all of us who are involved,” J. Alfred Broaddus Jr., an American Civil War Museum supporter and fund-raiser, said in 2005. He accurately described the agenda to use local history to sever the city’s tie with the racism associated with the Lost Cause. “We are here,” Black public history activist Ana Edwards said clearly in 2015, “to tell the world that most Richmonders do not support showcasing these monuments to Confederate military and political leaders.” This sentiment really hit home with dissenters when the American Civil War Museum not only absorbed the Museum of the Confederacy in 2018, but also rejected a $100,000 statue of Jefferson Davis holding a mixed-race child that was commissioned and donated by the Sons of Confederate Veterans.
While supported as a biracial and bipartisan venture by public history groups, local government, and business interests, the shift toward attaching Richmond’s identity to its Black history was led by Black grassroots organizations who were all too willing to oppose commercial interests. In the aftermath of the Canal Walk incident, the Elegba Folklore Society worked with Mayor Tim Kaine’s fifteen-member ad hoc committee “to create a process to determine how history should be interpreted throughout the city.” Emerging shortly after was the Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project of Defenders of Freedom, Justice, and Equality, with its goal to reclaim spaces where racism was introduced, fermented, solidified, and resisted within the city. Specifically, this group wanted to consolidate a nine-acre lot in Shockoe Bottom covering the African Burial Ground, the Lumpkin Slave Jail, the existing Richmond Slave Trail, and a site of Gabriel’s Rebellion into the Shockoe Bottom Memorial Park. This proposed park would be a “site of conscience,” “where people come to interact with the past” through public art and a museum dedicated to interpreting the history of slavery. The efforts of Black women such as Ana Edwards of Sacred Ground, Monica Esparza of the African Ancestral Chamber, Christy Coleman of the American Civil War Museum, and Virginia state delegate Delores McQuinn, as well as other local politicians and academics, were opposed by commercial interests that wanted to develop the Bottom into a shopping and restaurant district anchored by a new baseball stadium. These competing visions for the Bottom—to be the center of Richmond’s newer antiracist identity or its newer economic core—reflected a larger conflict, as the Times-Dispatch reported: “At issue then and now, [National Trust for Historic Preservation field director Rob] Nieweg said, is how to balance the city’s need for economic development while respecting the site’s archaeological, cultural and historical significance.”

even the most painful elements of it,” Coleman said, as more than 1,600 people signed a petition to prevent the construction of a ballpark at the Bottom in 2013.110 Edwards and others mobilized Black Richmond organizations in blocking development in the area, all while drawing painstakingly detailed plans for the memorial park.111 It appears as if their efforts, which began in 2004, will pay off: the ballpark plans failed in 2015, and the city and the commonwealth agreed, as of July 2021, to help fund the construction of Shockoe Bottom Memorial Park.112

The issues in Shockoe Bottom reflected an even larger divide between economic changes and Richmond’s emerging progressive identity, built by decades of public history activism. Decades of racial reform attracted corporations and progressive whites to take up occupancy in the city. By 2021, Richmond was home to twelve Fortune 1000 companies. At the same time, the total population grew from around 200,000 to 245,000 (which included an addition of 32,000 whites, 11,000 Latinos, and 3,000 Asians and a loss of 6,500 Blacks between 2000 and 2018). Richmond is now a “millennial magnet,” often ranking in the top five of growing regional cities since the 2010s. Upscale bars, restaurants, condos, historic properties, and business complexes have replaced the decayed infrastructure that once scared whites into the suburbs. This influx of capital and more white progressives, ironically, kept systemic racism very much intact.113

Decades of identity reform operated to the contrary of economic realities. As white businesses and occupants came in, Blacks and the growing Latino population largely remained trapped on the city’s lowest economic rung. The state’s low corporate income tax rate (6 percent) and the local

111 “A Community Proposal for Shockoe Bottom: Historic Place, Sacred Ground, Site of Conscience,” August 15, 2015, https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B7R6miR8W-yfQ1VtQVNsVmTEtTfueTMwTHZIZ3Nae3pzWTM0/view?resourcekey=0-FuhxAahfTBZ_8mhCQhU9qA; Center for Design Engagement, “A Community Proposal for Shockoe Bottom Memorial Park,” August 2017, https://drive.google.com/file/d/0ByGRw5JOG3LPOGV1MzRMS24zeXh3d1VGd2g4Rzdnc5tT0hz/view?resourcekey=0-Ofv42aFFp32bAaVShb0n2A; Ana Edwards and Phil Wilayto, “Governor’s Proposal Misses Mark,” Richmond Times-Dispatch, December 15, 2020, p. 17A.
government’s refusal to back unionization made Richmond even more attractive to corporations.114 The incoming healthcare and biotech firms relied on two workforces: highly skilled administrators/managers and low-skilled wage laborers. As was the case throughout the nation, whites dominated the highest skilled and highest paid occupations, while Blacks and Latinos were the city’s lesser-skilled and lesser-paid workforce. As a result, between 2000 and 2017 Richmond’s poverty rate increased from just over 20 percent to 25 percent. Blacks went from 61 percent of people in poverty in 2010 to a full two-thirds in 2017. The percentage of the population in poverty who were white decreased to 26 percent. During the same period, rates of poverty among Black people increased from 30 percent to 34 percent, whereas poverty among whites decreased from 17 percent to 15 percent.115 Side-by-side with Blacks in filling the ranks of Richmond’s working poor, a quarter of those in Richmond living below the poverty line were Latinos.116

Racial economic disparities were compounded by public policies that created housing instability for Black Richmonders. In the mid to late 1990s, the city council engaged in a two-pronged effort to demolish public housing and gentrify taxable properties. Public housing demolition in Blackwell and Creighton Court resulted in less affordable housing for

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Black people (an 11,600 affordable rental unit deficit in Richmond and 300,000 in Virginia), but Richmond still had the most concentrated public housing situation south of Baltimore in 2020.\(^{117}\) Passed in 1995, the city council’s fifteen-year tax abatement on capital improvements to “slum” or dilapidated properties unleashed a monsoon of white gentrification into previously all-Black communities, pushing some Blacks out of homeownership while trapping others in permanent unstable renterships. Increased home prices, property taxes, and utilities costs changed the racial makeup of places like Jackson Ward and Church Hill, where the Black homeownership rate dropped by 25 percent between 2000 and 2015. In the same area, white homeownership increased by 160 percent.\(^{118}\)


Black homeowners accounted for about half of the city’s foreclosures (around 5,000 in sum) between 2005 and 2015. In the twenty-first century, Richmond also consistently ranked in the top five among cities for the most yearly evictions, affecting about 11 percent of renters (four times the national average), most of whom were Black. “This is a cycle we’ve seen in Richmond for years now,” a white woman wrote in 2018 about gentrification in the capital city. The combination of public housing demolition and white investment has made Richmond one of the nation’s most effective displacers of Black people from 1990 to 2020.

Low-wage labor and unstable housing have been reflected in the city’s underperforming public schools. The perception and function of Richmond Public Schools (RPS) are closely tied to the economy. Since the 1970s, wealthy and middle-class Richmond-area whites have avoided RPS in favor of private and suburban options. Even the “liberal” white parents who started their children in RPS fled the district before the middle-school years. The metro area’s most impoverished students were largely

Rising Rents and Home Prices, New Framework Emphasizes Regional Approach to Housing Challenges,” Richmond Times-Dispatch, January 16, 2020, p. 1A.


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consolidated into RPS (30,000 students in sum), a district lacking sufficient funds, teacher and administrative stability, and proper facilities—many of which were deemed “borderline criminal” by the superintendent, Jason Kamras, in 2019.124 Student test scores, attendance, obedience, and graduation rates were consistently below the state average.125 Because of these abysmal rates, less than half of Richmond’s public schools consistently maintained full accreditation. The rest hovered over provisional or


unaccredited status. White attendance trends also impacted federal funding, as the majority of Title I funds primarily went to elementary schools with the most white children in attendance. While many saw the Confederate statues along Monument Avenue as Richmond’s symbols of white supremacy, “the real artifacts of the Confederacy,” wrote Benjamin Campbell in 2017, were the public schools.

Calls to address systemic racial poverty in Richmond, and the protest against racial violence elsewhere, particularly in light of tragic incidents in Charleston and Charlottesville, compelled Richmond mayor Levar Stoney to open a public inquiry about the future of Confederate statues along Monument Avenue in 2017. The decision was heavily informed by the fact that elected officials, from Virginia to Texas, had already removed 114 of the hundreds of Confederate symbols and names from the southern landscape since 2015. Initial efforts to rid Richmond of the statues fell by the wayside as Stoney’s commission was centered on reinterpreting, not removing, the statues. This distinction was key because many residents were unconvinced that fixing systemic racism required removing Confederate relics from the avenue. One concerned resident encapsulated the resistance by saying, “I am concerned that public funds needed to ameliorate the unequal systems perpetuated by the racial, economic, political, and social divides symbolized by the monuments—such as the persistently

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128 Benjamin P. Campbell, “Remove Real Artifacts of the Confederacy,” Richmond Times-Dispatch, August 27, 2017, p. 6E.
underperforming and underfunded Richmond Public Schools—will be diverted to fund whatever actions the commission prescribes in regard to the monuments. This would be a civic and moral failure. . . . These monuments are symbolic of much deeper, much more disruptive and harmful divides within Richmond and the surrounding region that must be closed—now, not later.131

As the summer of 2020 protest hurricane hit Richmond, the questions about removing Confederate statues turned into demands.132 This transition reflected another mentality shift. Many believed that removing the Confederate statues would begin the long-needed process of reconciling the city’s progressive identity and the reality of white supremacy. Researchers had long known about Richmond’s racial poverty issues; “It’s a disgrace that 30 years of talk have produced virtually nothing,” said former HIC member and political scientist John Moeser. He admitted, “There has been change, no mistake about it, but, unfortunately, the change has to do with our problems getting larger.”133 The protesters who marched in Windsor Farms—an elite, majority-white Far West End neighborhood—made it clear that the unrest of the summer of 2020 was “against more than” police misconduct nationwide. Rather, they argued that Richmonders must “tear down [the] mindsets” that allowed for a racial reconciliation movement to ignore the city’s abhorrent legacy of systemic racial poverty.134 Renowned journalist Michael Paul Williams articulated this sentiment: “Richmond, beyond the protests, needs a space to deconstruct the painful past that informs our racist present. There can be no reconciliation without truth, no peace without justice, and no apology without a concrete plan to make

things right. We must implode our structurally damaged institutions and rebuild from that rubble a more perfect place for all. People who’ve been protective of their privilege must learn to sit in the discomfort required for us to get there.”

National discussions about systemic racism mixed with local reconciliation efforts created a perfect storm that the Confederate statues could not withstand. This blending of the past and present cultivated a belief that Richmond’s inability to end, let alone place a serious dent in, systemic racism was grounded in the multigenerational defense of Confederate statues. Newer activists argued that racist public symbols could not be reinterpreted because their existence reflected past sins and present trauma inflicted upon Black people. As the argument went, protecting the statues’ place in the public sphere was, like the statues themselves, a symptom of the white supremacy plaguing modern Richmond. This realization led some Richmonders to vandalize and illegally remove some statues throughout the city. In the interest of public safety, Virginia governor Ralph Northam, along with Mayor Stoney, ordered the removal of the monuments. Their decision was supported by local industry and aided by newer state laws allowing localities to remove monuments at their discretion. “If we can dismantle the symbols of white supremacy, it means we can dismantle the legacy of white supremacy,” a local Black historical reenactor stated about the meaning behind calls to remove the monuments. While some continued to feel that the city should focus on alleviating the systemic issues that the statues represented, others argued that changes could not take place until the statues were removed.

Over the preceding decades, Richmond’s Confederate history had become decentered, marginalized, reinterpreted, and used to show how far Richmond had moved beyond its racist past. The need for racial reconciliation existed well before the monument removals in the summer of 2020. The statues came down with little resistance; however, Richmond is faced with the conundrum of fixing the issues they

135 Michael Paul Williams, “Apologies for Police Misconduct Are Not Enough,” Richmond Times-Dispatch, June 4, 2020, p. 15A.
represented. “We can’t talk about racial reconciliation without doing the work,” a trio of community activists once said about calls for more racial equity planning.\(^{138}\) Area public schools are still mostly segregated by race and class; whites own a disproportionate share of city resources; and the newer wave of gentrification is pushing low-income Blacks out of neighborhoods that their ancestors had been trapped in for decades before. While the 1990s provided the blueprint for reforming racial attitudes, the next step must be fixing that difficult history with systemic changes, a process that should be led by Richmonders themselves. City government cannot make residents personally reinvest in Richmond Public Schools and mixed-income neighborhoods. The legacy of racial reconciliation runs so deep in the collective heart, however, that government action should not be needed.\(^{139}\) “Here where racism started in this country is where it should end,” Campbell once said in support of more

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corrective, and less cosmetic, changes to the city’s identity. Should systemic changes not come, and Richmonders rest on their laurels, the monument removals will not be a watershed moment: they will be a hollow victory in a political game that Black Richmonders are bound to continue losing.

140 Benjamin Campbell, “The Sickness of Our Heart: We Need to Fully Acknowledge Racism,” Richmond Style Weekly, June 8, 1993, clipping found in the Hope in the Cities Press Book, File Cabinet #1, Initiatives of Change Archives.
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