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## RVA, Richmond, and the Geography of Memory

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Brian Palmer, *Untitled* [27 June 2015, Monument Avenue, Richmond, VA; private contractor hired by the city scrubs graffiti from the Jefferson Davis monument] archival inkjet print on paper, 26.7 x 40 inches, lent courtesy of the artist

## RVA, Richmond, and the Geography of Memory

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“Can The Old South Rebrand Itself? Richmond Tries, With A Dynamic New Logo” ran the headline of a 2012 article in the monthly business magazine *Fast Company*, announcing the city’s new logo, RVA — shorthand for Richmond, Virginia. “The former seat of the Confederacy has been quietly transforming itself into a more creative place,” explained author Emily Badger. “Now it has the visual identity to match.” Badger went on to describe the challenge faced by students at the VCU Brandcenter, who in 2010 were charged with rebranding the city, “a task more daunting given that Richmond has long had a strong, deeply embedded identity. This is the former seat of the Confederacy, the heart of Colonial America, the place where you go to learn about battlefields and founding fathers and early U.S. history.”<sup>1</sup>

The city’s rebranding efforts have paid off, so much so that the city’s newspaper of record recently published “a list of the nearly 350 accolades for the Richmond region,” including such plaudits as one of “Most Fun Cities in America” by *Business Insider* and one of *Forbes.com*’s “10 Coolest U.S. Cities to Visit in 2018.”<sup>2</sup>

It is possible to drive through the historic black neighborhoods of Richmond today and see evidence of the change from Richmond to RVA in the new breweries, cideries, high-end furniture boutiques,

and other businesses catering to the young and affluent that have popped up in local communities undergoing transition. As travel writer Carrie Nieman Culpepper wrote in *The New York Times*:

*For decades, the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Church Hill neighborhood of Richmond, Va., has been a don’t-go-after-dark spot. One of the city’s oldest residential enclaves, its historic townhouses, gas lamps and St. John’s Church — where Patrick Henry proclaimed “Give me liberty or give me death” — have long been tended to by a small band of passionate preservationists in an area of encroaching crime and poverty. But undervalued real estate and unparalleled views of downtown and the James River have increasingly drawn a fiercely loyal, self-starter set of residents. These days, Church Hill has some of the city’s most appealing shops and dining spots.*<sup>3</sup>

What these articles point to is a disconnect that *Richmond Times-Dispatch* columnist Michael Paul Williams has written about: “We remain two Richmonds — RVA blossomed while Richmond is being left further and further behind.”<sup>4</sup> RVA is sometimes coded white; *The New York Times* article seems racially coded in its reference to a “don’t-go-after-dark spot.” At the very least, RVA is colorless and is predicated on sweeping past Confederate and colonial histories to focus on the present. Richmond’s history, on the other hand, is more complex.

Also notably missing from the dominant, creativity-focused RVA narrative is any mention of Richmond's civil rights history, which seems to have been neither part of the "before" — the image that needed updating — or the "after" — the new, more palatable image of the city. RVA, as a place-making, advertising slogan implying a new conception of the city, has been widely embraced by tourists and many new residents. But the vibrant history of these neighborhoods, including Jackson Ward, which was once called "the Harlem of the South," has been lost from view. Absent from the city's new narrative are the Hippodrome and other famed black nightclubs, where entertainers such as Billie Holiday and Louis Armstrong performed, or the living rooms and offices where, in the 1950s, Oliver Hill and Spottiswood Robinson mapped out their legal strategies to take down segregation.

It is possible to sit at the bar at the Dutch & Company and Roosevelt restaurants in Church Hill and sip Belle Isle Moonshine, a liquor named for the prison island where Union prisoners of war were incarcerated and now one of the most popular outdoor sites along the James River, frequented today by kayakers and sunbathers. Yet the memory of the many shot houses that once dotted the neighborhood — informal African American bars, housed in private residences, where it was possible to get a drink and listen to records — is fading fast.

And it is not just the texture of these neighborhoods that has been lost. More than one longtime resident has told me that also missing are the thriving black businesses and the sense of a neighborhood so strong that it was routine for people to enter their neighbors' unlocked houses to borrow a cup of sugar. Some of the most important civil rights struggles of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are also invisible and seemingly unrecorded.

In contrast with cities like Atlanta, where — jokes an archivist friend of mine — everyone who ever participated in a civil rights march has been interviewed more than once, and where civil rights tourism is an established industry, Richmond has few markers of our rich African American history. In contrast to Monument Avenue, with its statues of Confederate generals that have for a century drawn tourists to Richmond, the United States Civil Rights Trail lists a single monument: the Virginia Civil Rights Memorial at the state capitol, which focuses on Barbara Johns, a leader in Farmville's struggle to desegregate schools in the 1950s — in other words, someone not from Richmond. This monument, unlike those of the Confederate generals, is not a destination, but rather something one might come across while visiting the Capitol. However, the local heroes of the civil rights struggle, both sung and unsung, are often undiscussed, and the sites where they picketed, were arrested, fought their legal battles, and desegregated schools remain unmarked.

Until recently, there was nothing to commemorate Richmond's role as the second-largest slave market in the nation, after New Orleans. Today, there is the Richmond Slave Trail, though this title is misleading; it contains few markers and is easy to miss. And while resistance to slavery is noted in a historic marker commemorating the slave rebellion planned by Gabriel Prosser in 1800, more recent moments of activism are often omitted: there is nothing to educate visitors or residents about the 1904 streetcar boycott, which was held to protest the new segregation of the cars a full 50 years before Rosa Parks and the Montgomery bus boycott.

Because this history is so invisible, few know that the Communist Party USA-affiliated Southern Negro Youth Congress was founded in this city in 1937, at a meeting that included such luminaries as W.E.B. DuBois and Mary McCleod Bethune, as well as members of the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts and representatives from nearly every black

college in the country. Members of the SNYC led a strike with black women tobacco workers that resulted in a significant raise; and they founded a theater group that performed dramas for black audiences about gaining the right to vote in an era of poll taxes. Where are their stories today?

In Maggie Walker's Jackson Ward house, a National Historic Site run by the National Park Service, there are photos of most of the important civil rights figures of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century sitting in the living room of this native Richmonder, who was a pivotal figure in the African American community. But apart from these images, there are few traces of the intellectual and political imprints left by these people during their time in Richmond. Likewise, there is no monument to the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century black newspaper editor John Mitchell, whose anti-lynching editorials made him and the *Richmond Planet* bywords among African Americans nationwide.

The history of the late-1930s black arts collective housed in Craig House in Church Hill is little known, along with the memory of black artist Benjamin Wigfall's arrest outside Miller & Rhoads in 1957 on charges of shoplifting. Wigfall had taken one of his Hampton University art students there to see his painting *Chimneys* (1951), now in the permanent collection of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. Local civil rights attorney Oliver Hill, already famous for his role in arguing the landmark school desegregation case *Brown vs. Board of Education* before the Supreme Court, took on Wigfall's case and got the trumped-up charge dismissed.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, the stories of some famous black "firsts" are well-known. Richmond school children learn of Douglas Wilder, the nation's first black governor, and Maggie Walker, the first female bank president of any race. Richmonders with an interest in civil rights have heard of the Richmond 34, a group of Virginia Union University students

arrested for their sit-in at a lunch counter at Thalheimer's department store, who appealed their conviction all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court — and won. Yet few today can imagine the daily texture of life for those whose world was turned upside down as a result of the civil rights movement.

During an era when many of these struggles were taking place, numerous Richmond public schools were being named for Confederate heroes. For example, the Robert E. Lee School opened in 1919, as black veterans were coming back to Richmond from WWI, and as race riots erupted in cities across the nation. Virginia, after all, has the second-largest number of public schools named for Confederate icons.

For several years now, it has been my privilege to sit with some longtime Richmonders as they told me about their lives. Many of them were born during the Jim Crow era and came of age in the civil rights movement. Sitting with them in their homes, in rooms reserved in public libraries, or at the ecumenical retreat center Richmond Hill, and listening to their stories has changed the way I experience the city in which I have lived for the past 24 years.

Driving through the Carver neighborhood on my way to see a movie with my kids, I think about Virginia Jackson, growing up in a four-room house on Moore Street with 12 or 13 relatives, all of them supported by her factory-worker mother. I think of John Dorman at age 12, getting his political education at the segregated YMCA from Virginia Union University students who taught him karate and took him on his first marches.

I see a GRTC bus passing by and remember Royal Robinson telling me that when the schools were first desegregated, he spent two hours each way getting to and from George Wythe High School

from Church Hill daily, on two different public buses. I think about all of the people who have shared stories of defying the color line on the bus and the consequences of that.

I cross the James River to Southside and remember Robin Mines telling me how, when her family moved to the white Swansboro neighborhood in the 1960s, the Klan burned a cross in her front yard. Two weeks after her family's arrival, her house was riddled by shotgun blasts. Of course, today it is impossible to see the traces of that experience. Sometimes whole neighborhoods disappeared like Navy Hill, destroyed during highway construction. The memories of all of those who lived and struggled through the civil rights era, who experienced sometimes painful awakenings, who founded new organizations, and mapped out lives that were very different from their parents are often not well known.

When my daughter, Nina, started studying at Thomas Jefferson High School, I recalled Reggie Gordon, one of the first black students there, telling me about how he and his classmates wrote poetry in French, and that the school swept six out of the top ten places in the state language competition. I remembered this as I sat in a parent-teacher conference with Nina's Spanish teacher, who shared with me that he really did not speak Spanish. It was hard to reconcile the school that Reggie described with the one my daughter experienced.

Conducting these interviews over a period of years for multiple projects enabled me to approach a single place and time from multiple, often linked perspectives. When my collaborator and university colleague Patricia Herrera and I were working with our students on creating a play about the years of mandatory busing at George Wythe, a project instigated by Wythe alum Mark Person, we

invited a small group of alumni to meet with our class. Unbeknownst to us, Mark had called a reporter at the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, who included a small item in the newspaper the day of our class that announced the time and location of the event. Over 20 alumni showed up, evenly divided between black and white. Many of them had not seen one another for 40 years. During their 90-minute conversation, they learned how different their perspectives were.

Several women, black and white, talked about their cheerleading coach, who had integrated the squad during the height of racial tensions at the school. Given the reverence in which they held her, everyone in the class was anxious to find Ms. Mimms, whom they thought might live in a retirement community if she was even still alive. I was shocked when I finally met Yvonne Mimms-Evans, a vibrant, energetic woman, and discovered that she had been only four years older than her students when she worked with them. Hearing her account of integrating the cheering squad helped me understand why she remained such an inspirational figure for her former students.

A couple of the interviewees were the children of key figures during the civil rights era. Mark Merhige's father was the federal judge who ordered busing to take place in 1970. The family's dog was shot; Judge Merhige was spat upon in restaurants; and the Ku Klux Klan picketed his house each weekend. Woody Holton's father was Governor Linwood Holton, who desegregated the Richmond schools by enrolling his own children in formerly all-black schools. Robert Grey's mother, Barbara Grey, created John B. Cary model school, the innovative elementary school that my own children attended. His father was executive director of the Urban League at the height of the civil rights movement.

Many of the interviewees found themselves playing a role in the great historical changes of their time, whether they desegregated schools, picketed department stores, leafleted for the Richmond Crusade for Voters or, like Reverend Josine Osborne, served as the state president of the NAACP Youth Council. In all of these accounts, history feels very close to the surface. As Zenoria Abdus-Salaam, Virginia Jackson's daughter, told me:

*When I looked at the census, even though I had always known that my great-great-grandfather was a slave, when I saw "servant" beside his name, it just brought me to tears. Hearing it is one thing. Seeing it on documents is something else again. That was a turning point in my life — to really know that yes, this was a real deal here in Richmond, Virginia. And it wasn't that long ago. The narratives always make it seem like it was a thousand years ago, but it was not. It was yesterday.*<sup>6</sup>

The experiences that the people whose stories and portraits fill these pages had during the civil rights era changed their lives in profound ways. Elizabeth Salim, who attended George Wythe during the busing era, participated in integrating the cheerleading squad. She went on to marry a Palestinian man from Jerusalem who attended a Jewish high school and noted, "I feel like we experienced the same thing, you know, going to a high school where we were the minority, and learning how to get along and move in both cultures."<sup>7</sup> As Loretta Tillman told me, "That whole time period was about what could be. I never lost that. Not one day out of my life have I lost that. And I raised my children with that."<sup>8</sup>

Today, it seems more important than ever that we hear these stories and see these faces. A few years ago, Patricia Herrera and I had our students perform a scene from the aforementioned play about

George Wythe at Henderson Middle School on North Side. Our students were taken aback at the noise levels they experienced when they walked into the school. During the early 1970s, when Henderson was built, planners believed that having classrooms with cubicle-style partitions, rather than more traditional walls, would facilitate the flow of knowledge. This architectural "innovation" ultimately created a constant cacophony that challenged the school's population. Yet 40 years after the school was built, this failed educational experiment continues.

As we entered the packed auditorium, it appeared that every single child and teacher present was African American. After our students performed the scene they had written about the integration of the cheerleading squad at Wythe, they conducted a talk-back with the audience. When one of our students asked if anyone in the audience knew what segregation meant, one of the Henderson students raised his hand: "Segregation was a bad thing that happened long ago in the past," he told us.

In the parking lot afterwards, Patricia and I talked with our students about what had happened. The Henderson students seemed to be living in a world as completely segregated as that experienced by our interviewees who grew up under Jim Crow. Perhaps because their state-mandated civil rights education was so bland and incomplete, Henderson students could not connect their lived reality with the segregation their textbooks assured them was a bad thing that was safely in the past. While our own class was equally divided between white and black students, a few of them reflected uncomfortably on the University of Richmond's legacy of segregation.

The stories the 30 individuals participating in *Growing Up in Civil Rights Richmond* shared with me demonstrated that, to quote

William Faulkner, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”  
As Zenoria Abdus-Salaam told me as she was mapping out her childhood world, “Where the coliseum is now was Navy Hill. Things change, you know. But those things don’t change for people who called it home.”

This exhibition and catalogue were intended to create a lasting record of the voices and portraits of individuals who lived through and helped shape the civil rights era in Richmond. In so doing, the project is also an effort to map what was onto what is — to document, in other words, the Richmond before RVA that lives on in memory, but rarely in public view. ■

#### ENDNOTES

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6. Zenoria Abdus-Salaam interview, July 21, 2018.
7. Elizabeth Salim interview, May 20, 2015.
8. Loretta Tillman interview, May 15, 2018.
9. Zenoria Abdus-Salaam interview, July 21, 2018.

# Growing Up in Civil Rights Richmond

A COMMUNITY REMEMBERS

All portraits for *Growing Up in Civil Rights Richmond: A Community Remembers* are by **Brian Palmer** (American, born 1964), archival inkjet prints on paper, 30 x 40 inches or 37.5 x 50 inches, lent courtesy of the artist.

The interviews in this publication are edited excerpts from longer conversations conducted by **Laura Browder** over several years. The full transcripts will be made available in the future on the existing UR archive “The Fight for Knowledge: Civil Rights and Education in Richmond, VA” [fightforknowledge.richmond.edu](http://fightforknowledge.richmond.edu)