Richmond's Other Heroes

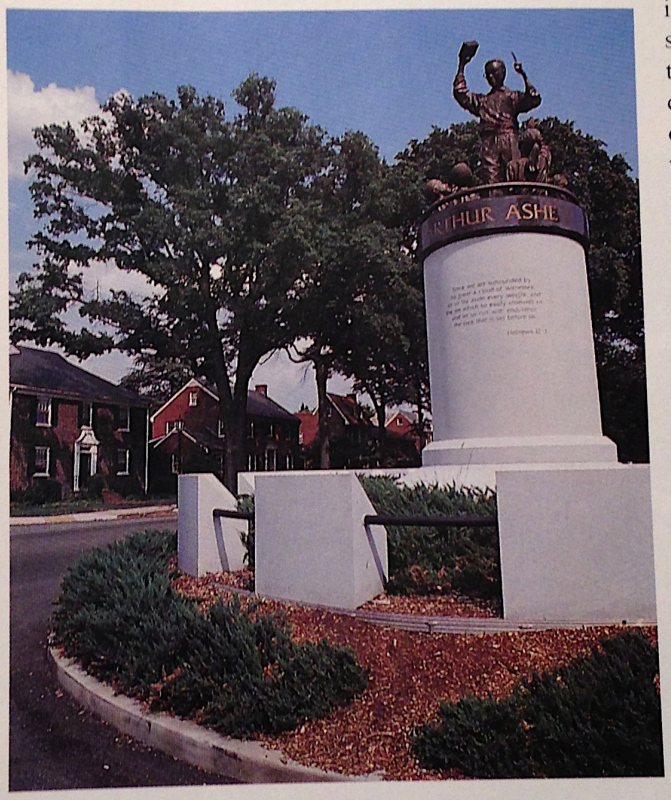
Finding African-American history in the cradle of the Confederacy

SINCE 1861 RICHMOND, VIRGINIA, HAS BEEN THE CRADLE OF THE CONfederacy—the city the Rebels held so dear that they preferred to burn it rather than have it fall into Yankee hands. After the Civil War Richmond's leaders rebuilt the city, sprinkling it liberally with tributes and memorials to the Lost Cause. Today Richmond is a magnet for Civil War buffs, who come to visit the Museum and White House of the Confederacy, which has the largest collection of Confederate material in the world; Monument Avenue, a broad thoroughfare lined with allegorical statues of Confederate heroes; and the Richmond National Battlefield Park where visitors can retrace the footsteps of generals Grant and Lee.

But for African-Americans, who make up a little more than half the city's population, the phrase "cradle of the Confederacy" holds scant nostalgia. So it was with some trepidation that I set off on a trip sponsored by the Metro Richmond Convention and Visitors Bureau.

I knew it would be worth being there if I could find out more about Richmond's other heroes, those blacks who fought in the Continental Army, built the city's roads and canals, worked as slaves in the city's mills and iron foundries, and labored as domestics in the elegant homes of the city's elite. I wondered whether this part of Richmond's legacy—that of a city made enormously rich off the sale of slaves—would be mentioned on any of the tours I was going to take.

As it turned out, I got a very good dose of this legacy at the Valentine Museum, whose exhibits chart the history of race relations in the city. Most intriguing was the Wickham House, a restored 1812 mansion attached to the museum. John Wickham, the house's original owner, was a wealthy, ambitious lawyer whose fifteen children and thirteen slaves once all lived in the residence.



Once reserved for Confederate heroes, Monument Avenue now has a statue of Arthur Ashe.

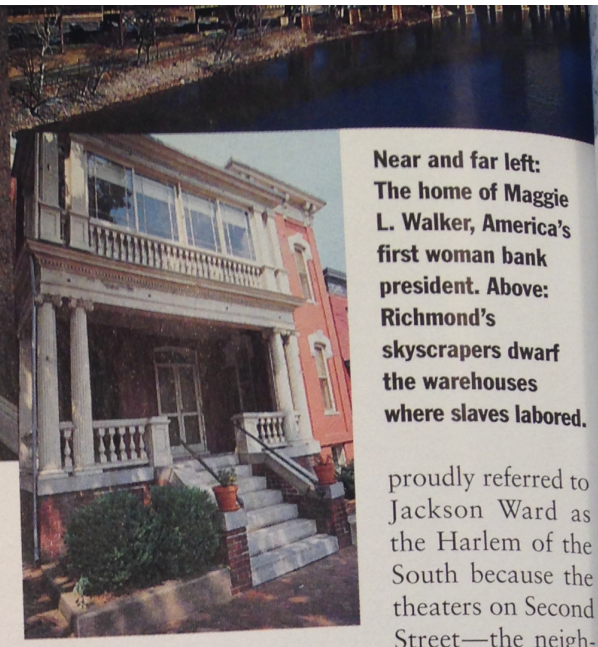
The Wickhams' tastes bordered on the ostentatious. The dining room and parlors are lushly furnished, the ceilings painted with frescoes, the floors marble. The basement quarters the slaves occupied are cold and damp with stone floors and no furnishings at all except for a few beds made of straw. In a recorded narration a weary slave describes her daily duties for her mistress—rising at dawn, cooking, sewing, washing, nursing, and cleaning.

Not all the city's slaves worked as domestics. Because nineteenth-century Richmond's economy was fueled by manufacturing, it spawned a peculiar form of slavery. Iron masters, tobacco and cotton manufacturers, railroad managers, and sea captains replaced plantation owners and overseers, with slaves making up a disproportionate number of those employed in the city's industries. In some cases this allowed the slaves more independence. Manufacturers often found it too costly to provide housing for company slaves, so many were allowed to choose and pay for their own accommodations.

One of the biggest users of slave labor was the Tredegar Iron Works, whose nineteenth-century industrial park on the James River has been preserved as a national landmark. Built in 1836, Tredegar became the Confederacy's main arsenal. Blacks were generally allowed to do only the heaviest and most dangerous tasks, and they worked fourteen- to sixteen-hour shifts. During the Civil War a manpower shortage forced management to allow blacks to work in the less strenuous foundries and machine shops and to receive compensation.

Today Tredegar Iron Works is being converted into a museum whose vast interior and riverfront location make it an ideal spot for community festivals. The day we visited, the Museum of the Confederacy was

ALL: W. LYNN SELDON, JR



Near and far left: The home of Maggie L. Walker, America's first woman bank president. Above: Richmond's skyscrapers dwarf the warehouses where slaves labored.

To look for the city's black heritage, one local told me, go straight to Jackson Ward, its spiritual heart.

sponsoring a Southern White House Bazaar, at which local collectors had gathered to sell their wares. I noticed a black woman presiding over a booth advertising the Jackson Blacksmith Shop Museum, which her family runs in Goochland County, about forty miles north of the city. She told me that in 1880 her great-great-grandfather, who had learned the trade while still a slave, had started his own blacksmithing business and built up a good reputation among both blacks and whites. The family continued to operate the small shop until the early 1970s.

The Richmond Area Black Memorabilia Collectors also had a table, and after I'd convinced one man that he'd have no luck trying to sell me anything, we struck up a conversation about good places to look for the city's black heritage. Soon another collector interjected that I should go straight to Jackson Ward, the spiritual heart of black Richmond.

Like Atlanta's Sweet Auburn and Tulsa's Greenwood district, Jackson Ward became a thriving center for black entrepreneurship around the turn of the century. Before the Civil War, because many enslaved blacks were allowed to live where they chose, slave and free blacks maintained close contact with one another, attending the same churches and living in the same quarters of the city. This helped create so intensely cohesive a community that Richmond's blacks were perhaps better prepared than any others in the South to face emancipation. Two months after the war's end, a group of African-American citizens sent a petition to President Johnson protesting a city ordinance requiring blacks to carry travel passes. "None of our people are in the almshouse," the petition declared, "and when we were slaves the aged and infirm . . . were turned away from the homes of hard masters . . . our benevolent societies supported [us] . . . and comparatively few of us have found it necessary to ask for government rations, which have been so bountifully bestowed upon the unrepentant Rebels of Richmond."

By the early 1920s blacks had managed to parlay their benevolent organizations and secret societies into insurance companies and grocery stores, barbershops and hotels. Jackson Ward had the first black-owned bank, the True Reformers' Bank of Richmond, and the first bank founded by a woman, the St. Luke Penny Savings Bank. During the 1930s and 1940s locals proudly referred to Jackson Ward as the Harlem of the South because the theaters on Second Street—the neighborhood's main thoroughfare—attracted artists like Billie Holliday, Cab Calloway, Bill ("Bojangles") Robinson, Lena Horne, and Nat ("King") Cole.

In more ways than one, modern-day Jackson Ward resembles modern-day Harlem—a neighborhood that has fallen on hard times but is determined to reclaim its past. On a drive through the district, I saw run-down nineteenth-century townhouses interspersed with beautifully restored ones. One of these renovated buildings holds the Black History Museum and Cultural Center of Virginia. The Museum's permanent exhibition, "Second Street: Business and Entertainment in Jackson Ward, 1900–1965," presents the area's history through photographs, newspaper clippings, and artifacts.

From there it's a short walk to the Maggie Lena Walker Home, a museum run by the National Park Service. Walker, born in 1867 to an ex-slave and a Northern white newspaperman, was the first woman bank president in the United States. Like most black children in post–Civil War Richmond, she endured extreme poverty in her early years. Her mother struggled to support the family by taking in laundry, which young Maggie was required to deliver.

After graduating from the Richmon

Colored Normal School, she worked as a teacher until her marriage to Armstead Walker, Jr., in 1886. In 1899 she was elected Right Worthy Grand Secretary of the Independent Order of St. Luke, then a fledgling benevolent society. She used her shrewd business sense to help the group recover from financial losses, and in 1903 she founded the St. Luke Penny Savings Bank, serving as its first president. Around the same time, she and her husband, a successful contractor, moved into a spacious home on East Leigh Street, then a posh section of Jackson Ward. The house remained in the family until 1979, when it and all its original furnishings were purchased by the National Park Service.

At the site we were greeted by a Park Service ranger, who took us on a tour. The ranger was black and female, and I kept thinking that Maggie Lena Walker would have appreciated that. We walked through the kitchen and into a dining room with beautiful mahogany chairs, an elaborate chandelier, and curio cabinets filled with fine crystal and china. A brown leather chair in the corner of the living room was so impressive that I knew instantly to whom it had belonged. "That was Mrs. Walker's chair," the ranger said anyway. "She was frugal and good with money, but she loved to surround herself with nice things."

Jackson Ward has several other sites worth visiting, including Virginia Union University, a black college whose first building had been a jail for runaway slaves, a monument to Bojangles Robinson, who grew up in the neighborhood, and the Sixth Mount Zion Baptist Church, which was founded by the renowned slave preacher John Jasper.

The Museum and White House of the Confederacy, in the Court End section of Richmond, was once the home of Jefferson Davis. In 1991 the museum mounted an exhibition chronicling the lives of the South's enslaved blacks, and many considered it a watershed event. So too was the election, in 1989, of L. Douglas Wilder, a native son, as the first African-American governor in the country since Reconstruction. But if anything reveals the extent to which Richmond is still wrestling with its identity, it is the controversy that erupted three years ago when the city decided to erect a statue of Arthur Ashe on Monument Avenue. Many whites were outraged, while many blacks, including Ashe's wife, found the site inappropriate for other reasons.

But the supporters of the Ashe memorial, among them former Governor Wilder, thought the statue would promote racial healing. In 1996, on what would have been Ashe's fifty-third birthday, his memorial took its place alongside statues of Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, Jeb Stuart, and Jefferson Davis. "I feel more pride and relevance in being here on Monument Avenue than I have any time in my life, and that says it all," said Wilder during the unveiling ceremony. "When the ground was broken [for the statue], more than dirt was removed. The shell of our understanding was penetrated."

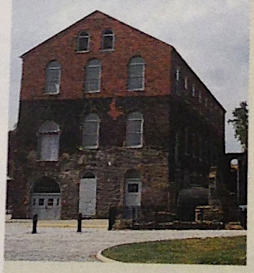
I saw Monument Avenue while on a bus tour through the city's historic districts. Our guide told us she wasn't going to say much about the statue but would let us judge for ourselves, based on the quality of statues that would come before it, whether or not the Ashe monument belonged there.

"We all want to honor Arthur Ashe," she said. "It's just a question of how we're going to do it. A lot of people felt that it would have been much better to have put the statue in Byrd Park, overlooking the tennis courts where he was denied access as a child." I studied the statue for several minutes while the bus was stopped at Monument Avenue, and I came back later to take a picture of it. It stands there, bronze like the others, but instead of a figure of a Southern soldier mounted on a horse, Ashe's feet remain planted on the ground. Instead of a sword he holds a book and a tennis racket, and instead of troops he's surrounded by children. I decided that I liked it, especially because of where it was. It was somehow heartening to see Ashe's simple memorial in the midst of those grandiose bronze sculptures of Confederate warriors.

Perhaps Richmond is finally on its way to being the city it should have been years ago, a place where the African-American experience is as honored and valued as the Confederate one—and where anyone can be a hero.

—Atiya Butler

TO PLAN A TRIP



The restored Tredegar Iron Works.

For information on things to do in Richmond, call the Metro Richmond Convention and Visitors Bureau at 1-800-365-7272. I stayed at the Jefferson (1-800-370-9004), an elegant hotel built in the 1890s and included in the National Register of Historic Places. Rooms there are a bit pricey; if you're on a budget, the downtown area has plenty of other accommodations.

Not far from downtown are the Shockoe Slip and Shockoe Bottom districts, whose nineteenth-century tobacco warehouses have been converted into trendy shops, jazz clubs, and restaurants. Jackson Ward lies just west of downtown. The Black History Museum and Cultural Center of Virginia (804-780-9093) and the Elegba Folklore Society (804-644-3900), a cultural and arts organization, sponsor a variety of events that keep the history of Jackson Ward and its people alive. The society also offers walking tours of the neighborhood. The Convention and Visitors Bureau produces a handsome guide detailing Jackson Ward's black-heritage sites; to obtain a copy call 804-782-2777.

The Arthur Ashe statue stands at the corner of Roseneath Street and Monument Avenue.