

Walking the Ward: Guided Historic Tour
Jackson Ward, Richmond, Virginia
By Gary L. Flowers

Many historians regard the Jackson Ward area of Richmond, Virginia as the “Birthplace of Black Capitalism” and the “Harlem of the South.” In particular, 2nd Street (or “The Deuce”) was the center of commerce, entertainment, and social life for Blacks in Richmond, and served as a model for other such streets in Black communities across the United States of America. Several points of African American interest follow:

1. **Old Armstrong High School (119 West Leigh Street)** – Originally called the Richmond Colored Normal School in the 1870’s by the Federal Freedman’s Bureau, the Armstrong High School was opened by the Richmond Public School System in 1909. Armstrong was one of two racially segregated high schools in Richmond from 1909 until 1956 (The other was named for Mrs. Maggie L. Walker).
2. **Bill “Bojangles” Robinson Statue (Chamberlayne and Leigh Street)** – Bill “Bojangles” Robinson was a talented tap dancer who danced on film with the likes of Shirley Temple and others actors. Yet, Mr. Robinson’s most impactful contribution to Richmond history was his funding a traffic light at the corner of Leigh and Adams Street to prevent little Black children from being struck by automobiles.
3. **Historic Sixth Mount Zion Baptist Church (14 West Duval Street)** – In 1867, following the American Civil War, and being licensed by Virginia Law to become a pastor, Reverend John Jasper who was formally enslaved founded Sixth Mount Zion Baptist Church. As Blacks and Whites regularly attended Sixth Mount Zion Baptist Church, the most famous sermon of Reverend John Jasper was, “The Sun Do Move”, which was delivered to legislators in the Virginia Genera Assembly.
4. **Interstate 95: Division of Jackson Ward (Back of Sixth Mount Zion Baptist Church)** – Following President Eisenhower’s Interstate Highway System legislation in the 1950’s, as was the case with most cities, the Interstate I-95 was deliberately built through African American neighborhoods. Such was the case in Richmond. The Black populated Jackson Ward area was divided in two, and the African American section of Navy Hill was obliterated.

5. **St Luke Building (900 North St. James Street)** - In 1903, The Independent Order of St. Luke, which was an African American organization dedicated to providing “proper” burials for Black Citizens, moved into the building. The Virginia Constitutional Convention of 1902 had racially segregated most aspects of daily life for residents of the Commonwealth to include cemeteries. In 1899, Mrs. Maggie L. Walker became the president of the Independent Order of St. Luke, a role she held for 35 years until her death. Within the building she operated her newspaper, and directed her civic and political causes.
6. **St. Joseph’s Catholic Church (715 North 1st Street)** – St. Joseph’s Catholic Church was established in 1884, 19 years after the end of the Civil War. Many religious historians believe the church had the distinction as the first Black Catholic Church in the American South. St. Joseph’s operated the Van De Vyver School for African Americans from the late 1800’s until the late 1950’s. For many of the Black children who lived in racially segregated neighborhoods in Richmond the Josephite Priests and the Franciscan Sisters of Mill Hill were the only White faces they saw.
7. **Richmond Beneficial Insurance Company (700 North 2nd Street)** - The Richmond Beneficial building had the distinction of being designed and constructed by African Americans. Professor Charles T. Russell, a native of Jackson Ward, designed the building and one of the earliest licensed African American architects in Virginia. Russell received his training in the building arts at Hampton Institute and received further training at Tuskegee. He will design and oversee the major renovations of several notable African American businesses, residences, and churches. Professor Russell was also the founding president of the National Builders Association. The African American firm of Moore and Archer did the construction of this building. Henry J. Moore, of the firm, apprenticed under Joseph Farrar, the father of contractor Daniel J. Farrar. Moore also served on City Council during the 1890s.
8. **Historic Third Street Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church (614 North 3rd Street)** - Third Street Bethel originated in the Trinity Methodist Episcopal Church, founded in 1828, located on Franklin Street, between 14th and 15th Streets, in an area of Richmond known as “Locust Alley”. In 1844, as the issue of American Slavery was dividing the White Methodist Episcopal Church, a number of free Black people worshipped who had been restricted to worship in the churches balcony began to organize a new church. In 1850, free Blacks led by Thomas Hewett organized with Third Street Church to form Third Street Bethel AME Church.

9. **Oliver W. Hill Bust/Statue (511 North 3rd Street)** – Attorney Oliver W. Hill was one of America’s most impactful lawyers. Mr. Hill graduated from the Howard University School of Law with Thurgood Marshall (later Justice Thurgood Marshall, Supreme Court of the United States), and they were on the legal team that won the historic *Brown v. Board of Education*, outlawing racial discrimination in American public education, and *Green v. County School Board of New Kent County*, which enforced the *Brown* ruling. Mr. Hill and his law partners, Samuel W. Tucker, Henry and Harold Marsh formed the historic civil rights law firm of **Hill, Tucker & Marsh**, which was successful in over 250 civil rights, and 50 school desegregation cases in Virginia alone. Among other distinguished partners, many of whom were confirmed as municipal, state, and federal judges, Mr. Hill was bestowed the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Bill Clinton. Both Mr. Hill and his former partner, Judge Spottswood Robinson are honored with their names on courthouses in Richmond, and a monument on the Virginia Capitol grounds, The cases the historic law firm of Hill, Tucker & Marsh won changed the law in Virginia towards equal justice for all citizens of the Commonwealth.

10. **Southern Aid Life Insurance Company (212 East Clay Street)** – In 1883, several Black businessmen in Richmond organized the Southern Aid and Insurance Company to provide adequate and affordable insurance protection to African Americans, and to promote jobs for unemployed Black youth. Southern Aid was among the first Black owned and operated insurance companies in the United States of America. Founding officers included W.G. Carter, Charles Johnson, Jr., W.A. Payne, John E. Taylor, and W.R. Coots. By 1937, under the leadership of A.D. Price the company employed more than 300 Black men and women in branches in Virginia and Washington, DC.

11. **Maggie Walker National Historic Site (600 North 2nd Street)** – Mrs. Maggie Lena Walker was not only the first African American woman to charter and direct a bank in United States History, but a suffragist women’s right to vote, retail business owner (Emporium), newspaper publisher, political candidate and an educator. At 14 years of age, she joined the local council of the Independent Order of St. Luke, an African American fraternal burial society, established in 1867 to aid the sick and promote self-help within the Black community.

12. **Hippodrome Theatre (528 North 2nd Street)** – Opened in 1914, the Hippodrome Theatre hosted Black entertainers such as Duke

Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, Count Basie, Sarah, and Cab Calloway. Many such entertainers performed in racially segregated hotels in Richmond, but could not legally be overnight guests in such hotels. Following their gigs, many would return to 2nd Street for late night “jam sessions” at the Hippodrome. Today, the “Hipp” has been restored and hosts a variety of events.

13. **Taylor Mansion (526 North 2nd Street)** - Mr. W.L. Taylor was the founder of an African American owned bank, The United Order of True Reformers Bank. His mansion was considered one of, if not, the largest single-family homes owned by Black man in the United States. Today, the Mansion is a restaurant and entertainment venue.
14. **Consolidated Bank & Trust (now Premiere Bank – 320 North 1st Street)** – In 1902, Mrs. Maggie Walker chartered the St. Luke Penny Savings Bank. She often used the metaphor of an acorn and tree to symbolize how a penny could grow into a large bank account. Later, she served as the Chairwoman of the Board when her bank merged with the Commercial Bank & Trust Company and the Second Street Savings Bank to form Consolidated Bank & Trust Company.
15. **Emporium Owned by Mrs. Maggie L. Walker (now 112 East Broad Street)** – Broad Street in Richmond was the center of the city’s commerce. Mrs. Walker owned and operated a store on Broad Street known as the “Emporium”. Her intent was to provide fashionable clothes and other items to African Americans and all people. White merchants resisted the presence of a Black owned store and collaborated to persuade suppliers not to sell to the store. Black citizens were pressured by their employers not to support the Emporium. After several years of commerce the Emporium was forced to close.
16. **Proposed Maggie L. Walker plaza and statue (Broad and Adams Streets)** – After considering other locations in Jackson Ward the City of Richmond has designated the corner of Broad and Adams Street for a plaza and statue to Maggie L. Walker. The sculptor is currently working on the statue. The plaza will serve as a “Gateway” to Jackson Ward.
17. **Abner Clay Park (200 West Leigh Street)** – Abner Clay Park was named for a very active civic and community leader in Jackson Ward, Abner Clay. The park serves as a recreational and event space. Annually, the “Black Family Reunion” and Richmond

Symphony's, "Celebrate Jackson Ward: Past, Present and Future" community concert are two major events held in the park.

18. **Rosa Bowser Library (00 Clay Street)** – Located at 00 Clay Street the former house of Rosa Bower became the *Rosa Bowser Night School for African American Men and Boys*. Mrs. Bowser was a renowned educator who served as President of the Virginia Teacher's Association. The building also once served as the Black History Museum and Cultural Center of Virginia.
19. **Historic Ebenezer Baptist Church (216 West Leigh Street)** – Founded in 1858, the Historic Ebenezer Baptist Church as played a vital role in the history of African Americans in Richmond. Originally, The Third African American Baptist Church, Ebenezer Baptist was the home of the first public school for Blacks in Richmond. Also, the Hartshorne Memorial College for African America women as organized at Ebenezer Baptist Church. Hartshorne Memorial College evolved into Virginia Union University.
20. **Leigh Street Armory (Now Black History Museum and Cultural Center of Virginia - 122 West Leigh Street)** – The Virginia Volunteers Battalion Armory was the home of the African American Militia Company following the Civil War until 1899. The building was constructed by the husband and Maggie Walker, and served as one of the only remaining Black Armories in the south. From 1900 until 1941 the Armory served as a school for African America children. The building is now the home of the Black History Museum and Cultural Center of Virginia.