



## **THE BIRTHPLACE OF AMERICAN CULTURE**

by

### **Regional Identity Immersion Team 2021**

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### **Introduction**

We will forever remember the year 2020 for COVID-19, but what the pandemic brought out front and center was the systemic racism that manifests itself in education, public safety, housing, transportation, food equity, and economic security. No place was the gap between the work from home haves and the frontline have-nots more evident than Richmond. Richmond, the former capital of the confederacy, has the opportunity at this moment to reconcile its past, using the crisis fueled by the pandemic as a launching point to remake itself as a more inclusive and equitable region where all people are welcome and thrive.

### **Scope**

We began by developing a hypothesis that Richmond is a place mired in its troubled past, unable to realize its full potentials like other cities in the south such as Nashville, Raleigh, Charlotte, and Atlanta. We explored how each member of our immersion team ended up calling Richmond home, whether native or transplant. We interviewed local experts and surveyed our LMR class about what was holding Richmond back and what it might take to transform Richmond into a vibrant place for all people. To understand how Richmond's identity makes it uniquely positioned for transformation, we first unpack its history, including the parts of its history not taught in school.

### **Findings – Needs, Problems, Issues**

Richmond's growth in population and economic prosperity for some came at the expense of Black Americans. It was home to the second-largest slave-trading center in America, with nearly two million Black people sold into the cotton industry in the deep south. After the Civil War, there was a generation of newly freed slaves looking for a fresh start and a chance at the American dream. Post Reconstruction, Virginia enacted segregation laws, championed the "Lost Cause," and built the I-64/I-95 interchange through Jackson Ward, separating the community from one another and access to food, healthcare, and meaningful employment.

Negligent public policy perpetuated systemic racism and prevented a large segment of Richmond's population from earning a living wage and gaining political power.

African Americans were forced to establish parallel economies to access jobs and essential services such as grocery stores, banks, and entertainment. Jackson Ward was founded in 1871 and quickly became the Harlem of the South - the Black Wall Street - a place where African Americans built successful businesses and communities.

### **Findings – Key Learning Points**

Today Richmond struggles to reconcile its “Lost Cause” identity with that of the birthplace of the (Black) American experience. The uneven economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 and police brutality against Black-Americans brought these issues to the forefront. Protesters took to the streets of Richmond, demanding that the monuments to confederate icons and reminders of white supremacy must come down. These events will be remembered as the catalyst for change. Richmond will begin to take the steps necessary to fulfill a meaningful commitment to equity and justice for all people.

### **Recommendations/Call to Action**

This immersion into Richmond’s regional identity bears witness to the history, stories, and perspectives that have not been widely articulated. “RVA,” or simply Richmond, has many views on who we are and what the future holds. We must take the unheard voices and stories and lift them to cultivate a greater understanding and appreciation of Richmond’s complete identity. We must each be bold and intentional, using our influence as connectors within our community, telling the whole story in our daily lives and our work. Our future identity as a region will be defined by how leaders strive to create an inclusive culture and shared vision where all people can thrive. Richmond has a complicated history but a tremendous future with untapped potential. We have Our Scars - Our Setbacks - Our Successes - Our Hopes. Richmond is the birthplace of American Culture.

### **Sources – Interviews**

Heidi Abbott – Hunton Andrews Kurth  
Laura Lafayette – Richmond Realtors  
Kelli Lemon – Jackson Ward Project  
Jon Lugbill – Sports Backers  
John Martin – SIR & RVA 757 Connects

Desiree Roots – Actor/Singer & Organizer  
Levar Stoney – Mayor, City of Richmond  
Shawn Utsey – Professor, VCU  
Jennifer Wakefield – Greater Rich Partnership  
Bobby Ukrop – Ukrop’s Homestyle Foods

### **Sources – Data & Readings**

Divided by Design: Findings from the American South (unumfund.org)

<https://www.grpva.com/why-richmond-region/>

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/monument-avenue-robert-e-lee-stature-renaissance>

<http://www.richmond300.com/>

<https://richmondmagazine.com/news/features/predicting-tomorrow/>

Survey of LMR 2021 Class

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=di9ff6fgFww>

<https://virginiahistory.org/learn/story-of-virginia/chapter/slavery>