On June 9, 2020, a group of Richmond activists removed the Christopher Columbus statue from its pedestal in Byrd Park and threw it into nearby Fountain Lake. Action to dismantle the monument came on the heels of a solidarity event with members of the Richmond Indigenous Society and the movement led by Black activists to protest white supremacist violence in the wake of George Floyd’s murder by Minneapolis police on May 25 of that year. Activists immediately targeted Richmond’s statues to subvert symbols of white supremacy prominently displayed across the city and regional landscape, particularly those related to the confederacy, with the end goal to mobilize a large-scale coalition to dismantle racist policies and practices enshrined in the region’s power structures.

The need to share, experience, and elevate these community histories, alongside their relationship to power and place, is vital. *A People’s Guide to Richmond and Central Virginia* centers these narratives, sites, and landscapes to reverse past erasures while also recognizing the power of communities to name and claim their own spaces, histories, and legacies. The guide situates the experiences of everyday people asserting their humanity in order to thrive within their own communities across time and space. It highlights the ongoing impacts and effects of these legacies throughout the region.

Richmond and Central Virginia, a historic and contemporary center for racist violence, also cultivates communities that organize for resistance and liberation. On August 11, 2017, tiki-torch-wielding white supremacists marched on the Lawn at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville before the “Unite the Right” gathering the following day. They organized the event in opposition to the city’s proposal to remove confederate monuments from highly visible public spaces in town. At that rally, white supremacist
James Fields Jr. drove his car into a large crowd of human rights supporters, killing Heather Heyer and injuring nineteen others. The events in Charlottesville heightened the sense of urgency among social justice movements in Virginia and beyond. Two months before the Charlottesville events, years-long debates pushed Richmond’s mayor to establish a commission to “develop context” for the five confederate statues on Monument Avenue. However, actionable plans for this work floundered until Black activists reinitiated the removal process through direct actions three years later.

Black-led movements reclaimed space and power often denied them in Richmond and beyond during the summer of 2020. Amidst ongoing police violence, protestors marched daily down Monument Avenue, which became a central site for community gatherings. Activists renamed the space that held the Robert E. Lee statue to Marcus-David Peters Circle in honor of a high school biology teacher killed by Richmond police in 2018 while experiencing a mental health crisis. On a meticulously manicured lawn set within a majority-white, affluent neighborhood, racially and economically diverse Richmonders decorated the statue’s pedestal with graffitied slogans in support of the Black Lives Matter movement. Crowds transformed it into a space where everyday life took shape; they played basketball, sold food, danced, and created community. People curated memorials to victims of racial violence, which they placed at the base of the statue. Simultaneously, protestors demanded significant institutional change, calling for the city to defund the police and demanding that the state extend its eviction moratorium during the
global coronavirus pandemic. This upsurge of resistance and protest was no anomaly; it was a continuation of four hundred years of community power and resilience.

These collective struggles are contemporary manifestations of centuries-long resistance by communities against the power structures embedded in Richmond and Central Virginia that place white supremacy, settler colonialism, and economic privilege at their core. Mired in conspicuous stories of triumphant white European settlers, first presidents of the nation-state, and wrongfully maligned confederates, the city and region today feature historic truth-telling processes as diverse communities memorialize their own histories while mobilizing to dismantle racist, patriarchal power structures. Many of these sites of resistance and survival, however, have been deliberately obscured from landscapes, historical texts, and public memory alike. *A People’s Guide* seeks to make them more visible to a broad, contemporary audience.

The first narrative signals the tendency of guides to ignore the extensive communities of the Powhatan, the Monacan, and their tributaries that occupied this region at the time of English colonization. Instead, the guides tout the legacies of English colonizers, often with no mention of the extermination campaigns they led against Indigenous communities. Guides focus heavily on white, male, often slave-owning leadership from the region’s colonial and antebellum eras. While some include significant Black history sites, they often use these sites to promote a narrative of “progress on all fronts,” suggesting a city that has moved beyond its oppressive past. Only one text mentions 2020’s “Summer of Protest,” and it fails to link that action to the region’s robust history of economic, racial, and social justice struggles. Most guides ignore predominantly African American, immigrant, and working-class neighborhoods, instead directing tourists, residents, and other curious citizens to established historic markers, monuments, and homes in the most affluent parts of the city that feature elite white history-making through a superficial lens of unmitigated progress.

The second narrative emphasized by guides promotes Richmond as a center for independent business, edgy art, hipster flair, unique charm, and economic possibility. *The Insider’s Guide to Richmond* notes that the city...
“has the advantages of a cosmopolitan city—top-notch museums, historic sites, beautiful and varied architecture, engaged universities, vibrant arts, music, and culinary scenes, and a spectacular setting along the James River” with the advantage that “getting around where you want to go is a piece of cake.” This rendering exposes a grave ignorance of a city with a high number of residents living in poverty, most of whom must navigate access to employment and housing through the region’s inadequate public transportation system. It also masks historically oppressive practices related to housing segregation, community development, and other means that often determine who can occupy which spaces.

A People’s Guide provides a critical intervention for more accurately rendering Richmond and Central Virginia’s past and present. The trajectory of perennial progress advanced in mainstream guides mirrors regional branding efforts, which promote lofty narratives of economic growth that tout the region as a creative center for tourism, business, and culture. Connected to this curated image is a recent cultural and artistic renaissance that, while deeply rooted in the area’s history, blurs the lines between corporate and independent artistic and cultural work. This rebirth at times serves as a harbinger of gentrification, especially in predominantly Black and Latino neighborhoods. In his 2017 newspaper column, Richmond journalist Michael Paul Williams, who won a Pulitzer for his Richmond Times-Dispatch commentaries during the summer of 2020, refers to this bifurcation—between a hip, upwardly mobile city filled with accompanying amenities and a city where many residents see little change in their inability to secure basic needs—as the RVA versus Richmond divide. The divide captures the essence of a long-standing gulf in which the city’s social and economic challenges remain inadequately addressed while high-end real estate development flourishes alongside national tourist marketing. Standard tourist guides only feature RVA; this guide aims to bridge the two to accurately capture the city’s, and the region’s, complexities.

RVA, the popular moniker for Richmond created in the early 2010s, intentionally brands the city to attract economic development and tourism. It symbolizes a culturally and economically affluent Richmond filled with craft breweries, maker spaces, and a food and arts scene rivaling those found in much larger cities. Richmond, on the other hand, is the city where 1 in 4 residents live in poverty, including nearly 40 percent of its children. It holds the dubious distinction of having the nation’s largest food desert for a city of its size alongside the country’s second-highest eviction rate. Due to centuries of racist policymaking, those in poverty are most likely to be Black, Indigenous, or Latino. Spatially, impoverished Black citizens are most likely to live in public housing communities that physically isolate them from the rest of the city.

Unlike traditional guidebooks, A People’s Guide connects the origins of the nation’s settler colonialism with contemporary contestations over white supremacy and connected socioeconomic and gender-based
oppression that still shape the region, and the nation, today. It centers five themes that disrupt dominant narratives perpetuated in tourist material and corporate media while exposing vast gaps created by these widely disseminated sources. Each theme emerges differently across city and regional geographies, and some feature more prominently in certain chapters than others due to historic and contemporary patterns of development and migration alongside economic and racial exclusion.

The guide intentionally places narratives of resistance by Indigenous and Black communities at its forefront. Thus, the first theme articulates the country’s founding as rooted in white colonization and settler colonialism, beginning with the first permanent English settlement at Jamestown. It includes people’s resistance to campaigns of extermination aimed at Indigenous communities and the mass enslavement of Black people to provide labor that drove the country’s economy for centuries. The second theme makes visible community efforts to dismantle the workings of white supremacy, including the disruption of Lost Cause nostalgia, an erroneously triumphant rendering of the confederacy as a heroic endeavor rather than one that sought to maintain enslavement by perpetuating racist institutions and belief systems. A third theme showcases community resistance to government-planned destruction, especially of Black neighborhoods, and the concentration of poverty by design. It highlights people working, often against enormous odds, to rectify the impacts of redlining and highway building, the racial and geographic segregation of public housing, and repeated waves of gentrification. Centering people organizing for environmental justice encompasses the guide’s fourth theme. These sites span rural and urban landscapes where people have mobilized against corporate greed and malfeasance in efforts to protect the health and long-term welfare of their communities. The final theme amplifies a homegrown artistic and cultural resurgence with deep roots in the region’s history of Black cultural production, the fostering of LGBTQ artists and activists, and the use of art to cultivate and sustain community. These sites exemplify contestations over artistic production that link to broader power clashes, most of which use art and culture to provoke social change. The guide integrates these five themes throughout the text in order to investigate sites of everyday life produced by, and deeply rooted in, past and present power struggles.

A People’s History of Richmond and Central Virginia

Werowocomoco, a place of great spiritual and political significance to the Powhatan, rests at the north bank of the York River. Thousands of people once lived there, and Central Virginia was the focal point of many Indigenous trade routes stretching far into other regions of the continent. Further west, ancestors of the Monacan traded with the Powhatan and the Iroquois to the north. Archeological evidence shows Indigenous
people lived in this region in both formally and informally connected communities for thousands of years before white colonization. Indigenous people began consolidating power in response to European encroachment as early as 1570. In 1607, English colonizers established their first permanent settlement fifty miles downriver from Richmond at Jamestown, and initially were unable to survive without the assistance of Indigenous communities. In a grim irony, colonizers soon pursued an agenda of removal and genocide against the Powhatan and their tributaries, the very communities who had once ensured their survival. At the same time, the Monacan actively deterred interaction with the English and continued to move west to avoid the colonizers for as long as possible. By the 1670s, the colony of Virginia had pushed the Pamunkey and the Mattaponi onto reservations, although Pamunkey leader Cockacoeske used what power she had to help ensure her community’s survival. The Pamunkey and the Mattaponi still live on reduced portions of these lands today. Estimates suggest that the area’s Indigenous population had decreased by 95 percent by 1700. However, their ancestors still occupy these lands, having resisted four hundred years of colonizing projects aimed at their erasure.

In 1619, the White Lion arrived, carrying about twenty enslaved people who had been kidnapped by the Portuguese from what is now Angola. This marked the beginning of the enslavement of Africans in the colony. Those forced into enslavement resisted the institution in diverse ways. In 1663, a Gloucester County group of enslaved Africans, white indentured servants, and Virginia Indians worked together in an attempt to overthrow their oppressors. In 1669, the colony’s governing body, conceding that many enslaved Africans and indentured servants had liberated themselves, sought more stringent laws to prevent future “runaways.” Enslaved people in Westmoreland County attempted rebellion against their enslavers in both 1687 and 1688; in turn, this colony also passed several new laws in the late seventeenth century to better control enslaved people and prevent their liberation efforts. By 1700, the English had exponentially increased the importation of enslaved Africans as their primary labor source to keep pace with the explosive growth of the cash crop, tobacco. At the same time, colonizers constructed and exploited racial difference. In doing so, they aimed to reinforce their control over enslaved laborers while codifying the privileges of whiteness in both law and custom, a process that the United States mirrored when the nation-state formed over a century later.

While Virginia’s landowning white men readily restricted the freedom of those with whom they shared the colony, including white women, Africans both free and enslaved, and Indigenous communities, they increasingly chafed at British control. The Revolutionary War (1775–83) provided opportunities for Indigenous and enslaved communities alike to pit warring whites against each other to create better conditions for their own people. Hundreds of enslaved people joined the British army when prom-
ised their freedom, and thousands took the opportunity created by the chaos of the war to escape enslavement. Indigenous communities also made bargains and switched sides readily between the colonists and the English, leveraging competing offers of alliance to better safeguard themselves.

Virginia became a state in 1788. Agricultural and manufacturing magnates in Central Virginia prospered, with tobacco reigning supreme. Other industrial development in Richmond, the state’s capital, included mining and ironworking; the Gallego flour mills, the world’s largest, shipped flour globally. This substantial rise in agricultural production and industrialization fueled the market for enslaved labor. Due to its population, river access, proximity to agricultural development, and emerging industrial infrastructure, Richmond became a prominent industrial and trade center prior to the Civil War.

The slave trade was Richmond’s number-one economic driver by the time of the Civil War (1861–65); the city ranked only behind New Orleans as the nation’s leading site for the sale of enslaved people. The business of enslavement was deeply woven into the city’s landscape; sales took place on street corners, in pubs, and in basements of the city’s most luxurious hotels. Enslaved people resisted when and where they could. Urban slavery, in which enslaved laborers were hired out, lived apart from their enslavers, and sometimes earned their own money from side work, defined much of enslavement in Richmond. It enabled a small number of people to purchase their freedom or the freedom of their families. Black Virginians also organized rebellions. The 1800 rebellion of Gabriel and his co-conspirators in Richmond and Nat Turner’s 1831 rebellion seventy miles away in Southampton County nearly succeeded in scaring the state legislature into abolishing slavery.

Richmond’s population swelled during the Civil War, both as the capital of the confederacy and due to its location near many battlefronts. Its downtown core burned to the ground when fleeing confederates set fire to supply buildings that grew out of control in April 1865. After the war, it remained a nucleus for white supremacy, with the rise of Lost Cause mythology, Jim Crow laws, and other projects aimed at restricting the rights of African Americans. In the wake of the Civil War, Richmond’s industries rebuilt not only the city but the South more widely. Its iron building industry thrived as did tobacco, especially cigarette manufacturing. Black men, newly empowered by the voting rights granted to them by the 15th Amendment, elected dozens of Black men to serve in the General Assembly in the late nineteenth century. One legacy of that interracial governance was the establishment of statewide public education. Concurrently, former confederates crafted a historical interpretation of the Civil War, known as the Lost Cause, that falsely claimed that a battle over states’ rights caused the war and it had little to do with slavery. This interpretation, meant to buttress white supremacy at a time when Black Virginians openly challenged it, included demarcating public space as white, embodied by the installation of a sixty-foot-tall statue of confederate general
Robert E. Lee on Richmond’s Monument Avenue in 1890.

Richmond and the region’s rise as part of the “New South” created a surge in employment for industrial workers in the early twentieth century. The area featured large-scale production in textiles, cotton, tobacco, and emerging retail and clothing industries. A system of racial and gender-based apartheid undergirded these industries. Throughout the nineteenth century, Black women dominated frontline work in the profitable tobacco industry, but by the early twentieth century, white women occupied an increasingly large number of these positions. Industries reserved skilled labor and management positions for white men, with Black men confined to labor deemed “unskilled,” which primarily meant those positions paid wages much lower than those paid to “skilled” white laborers.

In 1902, Virginia adopted a constitution that disenfranchised many of its citizens, most notably Black men, and segregation laws increasingly sought to treat African Americans as second-class citizens. Richmond and Charlottesville pioneered zoning ordinances as tools to enshrine racial segregation in the 1910s; other forms of housing discrimination continued into the 1970s, with projects touted as economically and socially progressive continually destroying Black neighborhoods in the name of revitalization and renewal. Segregation, however, also allowed for economically diverse Black neighborhoods to flourish. Jackson Ward became one of the nation’s most vibrant centers for Black business and entertainment. This tight-knit community also initiated numerous organizing and mutual aid opportunities. When women gained the right to vote in 1920, Black women in this neighborhood organized mass voter registration drives that led to more than 10 percent of adult Black women in the city qualifying to vote in elections that fall, despite the many racially motivated barriers to voting that they faced.

As Black activists vocally demanded civil rights in the 1920s, white supremacists further honed their strategies to maintain power. They passed a law legalizing sterilization for “idiocy, imbecility, feeblemindedness or epilepsy” in 1924, which specifically targeted poor Virginians. They also passed the Racial Integrity Act of 1924, tightening the boundaries of who could exercise the privileges of whiteness. Anyone with “one drop” of African ancestry could no longer be legally recognized as white. Walter Plecker drafted this legislation, and he led the state’s Bureau of Vital Statistics from its inception in 1912 until 1946. Placed in charge of official state documents including birth, marriage, and death certificates, he carried out a campaign of bureaucratic genocide against Virginia Indians. His work to expunge the existence of Virginia Indians from state documents had severe consequences in Indigenous communities’ quests for sovereignty and access to public resources. Nevertheless, Virginia Indians resisted these attempts at erasure, and as of 2022, the state is home to seven federally recognized and eleven state recognized tribes.

Union organizing in support of better working conditions was strong through-
out the city in the early twentieth century, despite political and industry-led attempts to use race to divide unionists. While this race-baiting hindered unionization, representation of unionized workers increased through the 1930s. After the National Industry Recovery Act of 1931 ensured workers’ right to organize, workers organized against mining, railroads, transportation, and utility industries, prompting state politicians to draft anti-union legislation. In the late 1930s, Richmond saw particular union growth as the Southern Negro Youth Congress organized thousands of Black women working in the tobacco industry. By the mid-1940s, however, legislators and their corporate supporters crafted laws to curtail the power of organized labor in the state’s largest and most powerful industries. Anti-labor actions also kept wages low, even as jobs became more available in the economic boom that followed World War II.

After World War II, urban renewal projects, accurately dubbed “Negro removal” by intellectual and author James Baldwin in a 1963 interview, significantly compromised nearly every Black community in Richmond, decreasing Black wealth for generations. By 1960, the city had destroyed thousands of housing units in Black communities, yet these projects predated the later destruction of the Navy Hill and Fulton neighborhoods. Similar midcentury demolition projects devastated Charlottesville’s African American communities, while Williamsburg had forcibly displaced its Black residents and businesses decades earlier with the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg in the 1920s.

Communities’ vitality depended on housing conditions as well as educational opportunities. From their inception in 1870, Virginia’s public schools were racially segregated. They became political battlegrounds after the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court decision desegregated public schools nationally. Richmond schools’ desegregation began in 1960 when Carol Swann and Gloria Mead, two African American students, began attending the formerly all-white Chandler Junior High School. In Charlottesville and elsewhere, Virginia’s governor closed public schools in 1958 rather than integrate them. Persistent lawsuits pursued by Black students and parents, argued by Black lawyers like Oliver Hill, eventually led to desegregated schools. Virginia Indians (see A Note on Terminology, page 15) also fought prolonged campaigns with the state to receive access to rudimentary public schooling. Today, struggles for educational equity look different, but they still reveal that students of color and lower-income students often receive inadequate schooling. Black and Latino students are overrepresented at underresourced schools, and communities continue to organize to address problems like overcrowding, police violence, the need for multilingual services, and inadequate protections for LGBTQ students.

By the 1960s, power shifted in the city as white families, fueled by fears of desegregated schools and aided by extensive highway systems, moved into surrounding counties. Local organizing among Black voters maximized African American voting power until the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.
eliminated the many barriers Virginia had erected to curtail Black voting. As a result, city officials annexed a swath of Chesterfield County in 1970 in a move to deliberately shift voting in the city from a Black majority to a white one. In 1971, activist Curtis Holt sued the city in response. In its 1972 *Holt v. City of Richmond* ruling, the U.S. Supreme Court called the annexation “constitutionally impermissible” but allowed Richmond to keep it in place if the city changed how it elected its leaders. As a result, the city did not hold another election until 1977. The subsequent election system, alongside the work of organizations dedicated to Black voter mobilization, led to the city’s first Black mayor, Henry Marsh III, and its first majority-Black city council in 1977.

The 1970s also saw women’s groups and gay and lesbian Richmonders claiming public space by organizing prominent gatherings in city parks. Women’s festivals, begun in 1974, eventually led to the city’s first pride event at Byrd Park in 1979. Feminist bookstores, communes, and activist groups that met in homes and supportive churches allowed gay men and lesbian women to gather safely. This cultivation of community support and space became critical during the HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980s.

In 1972, the Zajur family opened the region’s first Mexican restaurant near the border of Richmond’s Southside and north Chesterfield County. As a result, diverse Latino communities with familial roots in Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, Puerto Rico, and beyond settled in this particular area in subsequent decades. Since 2000, the number of people immigrating to Richmond and Central Virginia from Latin American countries has increased tenfold by some estimates. It is expected that 1 in 4 Chesterfield County residents will identify as Latino by the 2030s. As a result, Latin American culture has blossomed here in the form of markets, restaurants, and services, creating economic and social resources for their communities. As well, communities have organized to protect undocumented workers and address racial profiling. In the late 2010s, a group of undocumented immigrants formed ICE Out of RVA to organize against Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)’s collusion with local police to target diverse immigrant communities, and parents and students mobilized at local schools to contest school officials searching for anyone who “looks Latino” to root out undocumented families. These movements showcase the ways that communities continue to organize against oppressive policies and practices while building upon past histories of resistance.

Asian and Middle Eastern communities are growing as well. Asian American residents account for nearly 10 percent of the population in Henrico County, which surrounds much of Richmond to the north, east, and west. Arabic is now the third most spoken household language in Virginia, after English and Spanish. These communities are more recent additions to the Central Virginia region, and as a result, they are featured less prominently in this guide than others. However, these new immigrant groups will continue to reshape the region’s
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landscapes and power dynamics as they organize for humane immigration policies, multilingual educational and public services, and a host of other issues in pursuit of equity.

Everyday Space, Place, and Landscapes of Power

A “people’s guide” interrogates how power shapes people’s complex relationships with space, and how people collectively remake that space to assert their humanity and dismantle oppressive systems. It highlights the ways in which material spaces and places underpin shifting and uneven racial, sexual, and economic relations that took root at the beginning of European colonization and continue to shape communities’ access to economic, political, and social power.

Writing on the geographies of Black women in her work *Demonic Grounds*, Katherine McKittrick notes: “Geography is not . . . secure and unwavering; we produce space, we produce its meanings, and we work very hard to make geography what it is.” Just as geographic dominance and spatial colonization shape our regional landscape, residents challenge and reshape those legacies of conquest and exploitation. Part of the work of this guide is to uncover what such dominance has worked to conceal, to ask how residents of Central Virginia occupy and contest space in order to reveal how they move through and construct meaning in the spaces of everyday life.

Space negotiation reconfigures historic and contemporary routes that link communities to natural and built environments. These routes shape the movement of people and can serve as mechanisms to fortify, symbolize, and consolidate power. These historic and socially reinforced routes are often accepted as permanent fixtures in the landscape. As shown in the map on page 2, the James River bifurcates Richmond and flows past Jamestown to empty into the Chesapeake Bay and Atlantic Ocean. It has immeasurably shaped the region’s lived environment. To the Powhatan and the Monacan, the river served as a critical source of food, migration, and trade. For that same reason, colonizers pushed Indigenous communities away from the James and other significant waterways soon after their arrival. Later, the river allowed Richmond to grow into a large center for the sale of enslaved people. It also enabled a vast trade in tobacco, flour, and iron that set the stage for industry-generated environmental harm that still plagues area waterways and most affects communities of color, who live in areas most impacted by environmental hazards. Today, the river attracts affluent residents and tourists alike for leisure and recreation, but the growth of green spaces along the river also threatens further gentrification in historic African American neighborhoods while failing to adequately address the ongoing pollution of the river.

Similar to how the region’s waterways once shaped settlement and trade patterns, highway and interstate construction has driven regional trade, tourism, and migration routes since the 1950s. Interstate 95, the region’s major thoroughfare that runs from Florida to Maine, and Interstate 64, the