

# Valentine Richmond History Walks

## Self-Guided Walk of the Oregon Hill Neighborhood

Text-Only Version

This tour is for personal educational use. The Valentine is not liable for any injury, incident or consequential damages resulting from the use of these materials. Participants are encouraged to follow traffic rules, bring water and wear comfortable shoes.

*All directions are in italics. The tour starts in front of St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, 240 S. Laurel Street (near the corner of Idlewood Avenue and Laurel Street).*

### Welcome to Oregon Hill

The Oregon Hill Historic District extends from Cary Street to the James River and from Belvidere Street to Hollywood Cemetery and Linden Street. Oregon Hill's name is said to have originated in the late 1850s, when a joke emerged that people who were moving into the area were so far from the center of Richmond that they might as well be moving to Oregon.

By the mid-1900s, Oregon Hill was an insular neighborhood of white, blue-collar families and had a reputation as a rough area where outsiders and African-Americans, in particular, weren't welcome. Today, Oregon Hill is home to two renowned restaurants and a racially and economically diverse population that includes long-time residents, Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) students and people wanting to live in a historic part of Richmond.

You're standing in front of St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, which began in 1873 as a Sunday school mission of St. Paul's Episcopal Church in downtown Richmond. The original church building, erected in 1875, was made of wood, but in 1901, it was replaced by this building. It is Gothic Revival in style, and the corner tower is 115 feet high. It was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1979.

*Walk to the corner of Idlewood Avenue and Laurel Street, turn right and walk one block west to the corner of Idlewood Avenue and Cherry Street.*

### St. Andrew's School

St. Andrew's School was established in 1894 by Grace Arents. Symbols carved in stone over the school's name on the Idlewood Avenue side show the kinds of subjects that were taught, including sewing, painting, mechanical drawing and reading. Today, the school offers classes K-5 to approximately 100 students.

Grace Arents (1848-1926) was the niece of Lewis Ginter, a wealthy businessman and philanthropist who gave Richmond some of its finest treasures, including the Jefferson Hotel and the Lakeside Wheel Club, which became Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden. When Ginter died in 1897, he left most of his fortune to Arents. Like her uncle, Arents never married, and she devoted herself to causes that would benefit the people of Richmond. Her efforts on behalf of the neighborhood earned her the nickname "The Angel of Oregon Hill."

***Turn left and walk south on Cherry Street one block to the entrance of Hollywood Cemetery at Cherry and Albemarle streets.***

### **Hollywood Cemetery**

In Richmond's early days, people were buried in church graveyards and family cemeteries, but as the population continued to grow in the 1800s, space became an issue. In 1847, this land was owned by the Harvie family and known as Harvie's Woods. William Haxall and Joshua Fry purchased Harvie's Woods and hired landscape architect John Notman (who also designed Capitol Square) to create a new public cemetery. Notman was a student of the English style, in which the design is determined by the topography, so Hollywood Cemetery is defined by its hills, meandering paths and natural vegetation. The cemetery was dedicated in 1849 and named for its abundance of American Holly trees.

Hollywood Cemetery had a second intended use as a public green space for the benefit of Richmond residents who lived in crowded parts of the city. The graves of James Monroe and John Tyler are located in President's Circle, making Hollywood Cemetery one of only three cemeteries in the country in which two American presidents are buried. The cemetery also includes the graves of many prominent Richmonders, as well as Confederates Jefferson Davis, Gen. J.E.B. Stuart and Gen. George Pickett. A 90-foot-high granite pyramid acts as a memorial to the more than 18,000 Confederate enlisted men buried in the cemetery. Hollywood Cemetery is still an active cemetery with around 200 burials a year.

***Continue walking south on Cherry Street to 415 S. Cherry St., located on the left (east) side of the street.***

### **415 S. Cherry St.**

Although some of the homes in Oregon Hill were built prior to the Civil War, many of them date from around 1880 through the early 1900s. Most of the structures are Italianate in style, made of wood, with flat roofs, deep overhangs, brackets and long, thin windows. As you walk through the neighborhood, keep an eye out for interesting uses of color, as well as unique architectural features such as the porch ornamentation on this house at 415 S. Cherry St.

Oregon Hill residents have become quite active in historic preservation efforts. The Oregon Hill Home Improvement Council (OHHIC) was organized in 1973, and has worked to improve the area and establish affordable housing by building new houses on empty lots and rehabilitating existing houses. These efforts have resulted in Oregon Hill being one of the best-preserved 19th-century neighborhoods in Richmond, and one of the best collections of working-class housing in the country.

***Continue walking south on Cherry Street to the end of the block. Turn left and walk east on Spring Street for one block. Then turn right and walk south on Laurel Street for two blocks to the corner of Laurel and Holly streets.***

## **Holly Street Playground**

On your right, you'll see the Holly Street Playground, which is located on land donated by Grace Arents. It's one of the oldest public playgrounds in the city of Richmond.

*Continue walking south one block to the end of Laurel Street, then turn left on Oregon Hill Parkway. Walk west one block to the Oregon Hill Overlook at the end of Pine Street.*

## **Oregon Hill Overlook**

Looking at the James River below, you can see why Richmond is located where it is. When Christopher Newport sailed up the James River in 1607, he encountered a seven-mile fall line – part of which lies below you - in which the river drops 105 feet in elevation. The English ships couldn't get past this part of the river, so they decided to establish an inland tobacco processing center here.

## **Tredegar Iron Works**

Although you may not be able to see it because of the trees, across Belvidere Street to your left, down along the river, is the location of Tredegar Iron Works. The development of Oregon Hill as a neighborhood occurred because workers at the Iron Works decided to move their families closer to their place of employment.

By 1860, Tredegar was the third-largest iron manufacturer in the US, focusing on steam locomotives and rail stock. At the start of the Civil War, half of its 900 workers were enslaved African-Americans. During the Civil War, Tredegar produced cannons and other munitions for the Confederacy, and supplied the iron plates for the Confederate ironclad, the CSS Virginia. After the Civil War, Tredegar Iron Works dropped from national prominence as industry shifted from iron to steel. It continued to operate until the mid-20th century, and today is the site of the American Civil War Museum at Historic Tredegar and a National Park Service Visitor's Center for the Richmond National Battlefield Park.

## **Belle Isle**

Directly across the river you can see Belle Isle, which can be accessed via a footbridge located across from Tredegar Iron Works and suspended beneath the Lee Bridge (Belvidere Street). From 1862-1865, the Confederacy used Belle Isle as a prisoner-of-war camp for Union enlisted men. The Confederate cannons on the heights above the camp and the powerful James River current made escape impossible. The prisoners were given only minimal shelter and provisions, leading to the deaths of more than 1,000 Union soldiers from exposure, sickness and starvation.

## **Riverside Park**

Around 1889, the city acquired a parcel of land for the development of Riverside Park, which forms the southern boundary of Oregon Hill. This was around the same time that the city was establishing other hilltop parks with vistas, such as Libby Hill Park. The octagon-shaped building on your left at the corner of Oregon Hill Parkway and Pine Street dates from around 1900 and was a comfort station.

*Turning away from the river, walk north on Pine Street one block to the corner of Pine and Holly streets.*

## **Virginia War Memorial**

To your right, you'll see the Virginia War Memorial, which stands on land that was originally part of Oregon Hill. The building combines Mid-Century Modern architecture with the look of a Greek temple, and includes sculptor Leo F. Friedlander's, *Memory*, a 22-foot-tall statue of a grieving woman.

The General Assembly authorized construction of the memorial in 1950, as a way to commemorate the sacrifices of heroic Virginians during World War II. While the memorial was still being designed, the Korean War broke out, so after the Memorial was completed in 1955, it was dedicated to veterans of both World War II and the Korean War. It now also honors Virginians killed in Vietnam, the Gulf War and 21st-century conflicts. The memorial also offers educational experiences, monthly patriotic programs, films, exhibits and a research library that cover Virginians' experiences with war from the American Revolution to the present day.

*Continue walking north on Pine Street one block to the corner of Pine and China streets.*

## **Belvidere**

In 1673, the King of England gave a patent for all of the land that comprised Richmond to William Byrd I. Byrd's son, William Byrd II, laid out the town in 1737 and named it Richmond because the view of the James River from Libby Hill reminded him of the view of the Thames River at a town called Richmond-upon-Thames outside London. The land then passed to his son, William Byrd III, who in 1755 built a summer house ahead and to the right of where you are standing, in the area bounded by present-day Pine, China, Belvidere and Spring streets.

The house was named Belvidere, meaning "Beautiful View." It was described in insurance records as being an unpretentious two-story frame house with a wing on each side, but it featured a prominent serpentine wall, most likely the first of its kind in America, which completely encircled the house and gardens.

William Byrd III ended up suffering financial difficulties due to gambling and over-spending, so in 1768, in an attempt to pay his debts, he sold off 100-acre tracts of land in Oregon Hill, including Belvidere, in a land lottery. Belvidere was used as a boarding house for Tredegar iron workers

before the house and gardens burned in 1854. Bricks from the house were used to construct chimneys in nearby houses.

Immediately in front of you on the right is the award-winning restaurant L'Opposum, a "loosely French" restaurant that opened in 2014. The Italianate building dates to 1895, and previously housed several other restaurants, including John's Chuck Wagon, the Hollywood Grill, Pescados and EAT. *Southern Living* magazine included L'Opposum on a list of "30 eateries that everyone needs to try," and *Conde Nast Traveler* named it one of the "10 Unmissable Restaurants in the American South."

The school on your left, at 600 S. Pine St., was originally the Grace Arents Public School. It was built in 1911 using money and land donated by Grace Arents. It's now Open High School, which was established in 1972 as a way to help students learn independence and self-determination by developing their own learning programs and taking both high school and college-credit classes. *U.S. News & World Report* currently ranks Open High School the #1 high school in the Richmond metro area and #493 on the list of the top 500 high schools in the country.

In the mid-1970s, the understated building to your right was a Sur-Way Market, but since the 1990s it has become the home of Mamma Zu's, a restaurant known for incredible Italian food. Over the years, a number of celebrities have been spotted eating here, including Daniel Day-Lewis, Tom Hanks and Bruce Springsteen.

***Turn right and walk east on Spring Street one block, to the red-brick house at 601 Spring St.***

### **Virginia State Penitentiary**

If you look slightly to the left across Belvidere Street, you'll see a modern building marked with white criss-cross lines. This is where the Virginia State Penitentiary once stood. In 1796, the General Assembly passed legislation authorizing the construction of a penitentiary and providing details on its design and operation. The penitentiary opened in 1800 with 21 prisoners.

Architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe's design was architecturally impressive, but had some serious flaws, including a lack of heat, plumbing, good ventilation and a prison dining area. Latrobe's original structure was torn down in 1928 and replaced with a new prison on the same spot. Beginning in 1908, all state executions occurred at the Virginia State Penitentiary, using the electric chair. The prison was closed in December 1990 and torn down in 1992.

### **Parson's House**

To your right, this red-brick house was built in 1819 for Samuel Pleasants Parsons (1743-1842), a reform-minded Quaker who was a long-time superintendent of the Virginia State Penitentiary. The Parsons House is the second-oldest house in Oregon Hill, and its location here is within the serpentine wall that surrounded Belvidere.

***Turn around and walk west one block back to Pine Street. Turn right and walk north one block to the corner of Pine and Albemarle streets.***

### **Pine Street Baptist Church**

Pine Street Baptist Church, at 400 S. Pine St., is the oldest surviving church building in Oregon Hill, dating to 1886, with additions made in 1925. The church itself was founded in 1855 after members decided that there were so many people traveling from Oregon Hill to worship at Grace Baptist Church in Windsor Farms that they needed their own church.

Across Albemarle Street, the building on the left at 334 S. Pine St. operated as the Pine Street Pharmacy from 1882 until its last proprietor, "Doc" Malone, died in 1956. It then became the Pine Street Confectionery, which featured a soda fountain, pool table and game room and, oddly enough, also sold tools and hardware supplies. In 1998, Michael Gahan moved his Pine Street Barber Shop here. The shop continues to offer full salon services to men, women and children.

***Continue north on Pine Street for one block, then turn left on Idlewood Avenue. Walk west on Idlewood Avenue for one block and return to St. Andrew's Episcopal Church.***

***Thank you!***

***This completes your walking tour of Oregon Hill. We hope you have enjoyed learning about one of our treasured neighborhoods, its history and the stories you can uncover. If you would like to learn more about Oregon Hill, please check out the Valentine's online exhibit, [Disciples of Vulcan: Examining the Oregon Hill Community](#), which can be found on Google Arts & Culture.***

### **Explore Richmond Stories**

Richmond's City history museum, the Valentine has been collecting, preserving and interpreting Richmond's 400-year history for over a century. Located in the heart of historic downtown, the Valentine is a place for residents and tourists to discover the diverse stories that tell the broader history of this important region.

### **Visit**

**Tuesday - Sunday | 10a.m. - 5p.m.**

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