Figures of Freedom

**Self-Guided History Walk
through Richmond's Shockoe Bottom**

Front page intro:

Welcome to Shockoe Bottom! The Valentine First Freedom Center is dedicated to educating about Thomas Jefferson's Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom and exploring the evolution of freedom of conscience. As you enjoy this walk through Richmond's oldest neighborhood, you'll discover brave individuals who undertook struggles freedom and helped shape America.

1) Valentine First Freedom Center | 14 South 14th Street

The first capitals of Virginia were Jamestown and Williamsburg, but in 1780 the state capital was moved to Richmond to evade the British army during the Revolutionary War. Before the State Capitol building was constructed, the Virginia legislature met in a quaint building on this spot.

Under British rule, the Church of England was the state-sanctioned religion. In the new American republic, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison championed *freedom of conscience*, the idea that people should be free to worship, or not to worship, in whatever manner they choose. Their Statute for Religious Freedom was enacted into law by the Virginia General Assembly at this site on January 16, 1786. The first law guarantying absolute religious freedom in the nation, its language became the basis for part of the First Amendment in the U.S. Constitution's Bill of Rights.

While Jefferson and the founding fathers were enshrining the right to "life, freedom, and the pursuit of happiness," in actuality, liberty has not always been an equal reality for all Americans.

2) Axis mundi | 14 South 14th Street

Commissioned in 2015, and created by a local design company, Tektonics Design Group, this sculpture is based on the axis mundi, a symbol of the place where the earth meets the sky (heaven and earth. The spire is forged and twisted to symbolize the difficulties inherent in a diverse society's blending of beliefs.

3) James River and the Kanawha Canal System | Dock and 14th Streets

The history of people living in Richmond dates back thousands of years. This region is the ancestral land of the Eastern Woodland Indians and Powhatan people. Virginia's Indigenous people relied on the Chesapeake Bay and James River system for food, transportation, and other resources.

When English colonizers arrived in the 17th century, they established a tobacco processing settlement at the base of the river's falls and dug a canal parallel to the river to provide power. Richmond's position at the crossroads of a river, canal system, and later the railroad, would lead to its growth as an industrial center in the 18th century.

4) Henry Box Brown Monument | Canal Walk and Dock Street

Before the Civil War, Richmond was the second-largest slave market in the nation (New Orleans was the largest). Shockoe Bottom had more than 90 slave markets within the eight-block area and it is estimated that 350,000 - 500,000 people were sold here between 1830-1860.

Enslaved people participated in many forms of resistance to this brutal system, from small every day acts to bold measures like self-emancipation. Henry "Box" Brown was a 33-year-old enslaved man in Richmond when his pregnant wife and their three children were sold away in 1849. With little hope of reuniting, Brown resolved to escape from bondage. Brown sealed himself in a box with just some water and a few biscuits, and shipped himself to the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society. Over the course of 27 hours he was transported to freedom, travelling 350 miles by wagon, railroad, steamboat, and delivery wagon. After his incredible escape, Brown was given the nickname "Box." He became a well-known abolitionist speaker and published two autobiographies telling his story.

5) Castle Thunder | Cary Street between 17 and 18th Streets

During the Civil War, this former tobacco warehouse was the site of the Confederate prison Castle Thunder. One prisoner was Dr. Mary Walker. Walker did not believe in conforming to women's gender roles or dress codes. Originally from New York, Walker graduated from medical school in 1855, becoming one of few women physicians in the country. During the Civil War, she was denied an appointment as a military surgeon, and instead served as a volunteer assistant surgeon in hospitals and the field. In 1864, while tending to wounded Union soldiers, Walker was captured by Confederate troops and brought to Castle Thunder as a prisoner of war. The Confederates used the fact that she was wearing pants under a skirt to claim Walker was a Union spy. She was eventually released in a prisoner exchange and was awarded the presidential Medal of Honor in 1866.

6) Tobacco Warehouses | North 19th and East Cary streets

Richmond's tobacco industry began in the 18th century with the establishment of tobacco inspection warehouses and its growth was reliant on forced labor. Enslaved workers stemmed tobacco leaves and pressed them into cakes of chewing tobacco.

In 1865, as the Confederate army evacuated Richmond, they set fire to the warehouses to prevent the Union army from accessing valuable goods. The resulting fire spread out of control and caused the destruction of more than 50 blocks. The fire was finally extinguished a day later by Union soldiers. On April 4, 1865, President Abraham Lincoln arrived in Richmond by boat on the James River. Lincoln proceeded toured war-torn Richmond on foot, greeted along the way by celebratory crowds of formerly enslaved people newly freed.

7) Libby Prison Site | East Cary and North 20th streets

This is the former site of Libby Prison, which housed Union officers during the Civil War. Crowded and exposed to the elements, prisoners often suffered severe food shortages. In February 1864, 109 Union prisoners escaped after spending months digging a tunnel under Cary Street. 48 were recaptured and two drowned in the James River, but 59 officers eventually reached freedom on the other side of Union lines.

8) Virginia Holocaust Museum | 2000 East Cary Street

Jacob Ipp (born in 1935) was a young Jewish boy living in Kaunas, Lithuanian when the German Nazi army occupied the city and began the systematic persecution of Jewish people, forcing his family into the Kovno Ghetto in 1941. Later, in 1943 young Jacob and his mother escaped while in line to be deported for execution. They spent 9 months hiding in the countryside, much of the time living underground in a potato hole. When Jacon was 12, the family immigrated to Richmond and changed their name to Ipson.

In 1997, Jay (Jacob) Ipson, along with friends Mark Fetter and Al Rosenbaum, founded the Virginia Holocaust Museum to educate people on the atrocities of the Holocaust and "through exhibits, programming, and outreach, use the history of genocide to teach the dangers of prejudice and indifference."

9) Early Quakers in Richmond Historical Marker | North 20th and East Main streets

This was the site of an early Quaker meetinghouse built in 1798. The Society of Friends, or Quakers, was an independent religious sect whose members experienced persecution for their beliefs. The search for spiritual freedom led a group of Quakers to flee England and immigrate to the United States, first settling in Pennsylvania. Many Quakers were active in the movement opposed to slavery during in the 19th century.

10. Caratoes Caterpillar Mural |1814 East Main Street

The Richmond Mural Project created over 100 murals and cemented Richmond's reputation as an arts destination. This Red White and Blue Caterpillar was created by Belgium artist Caratoes. Richmond's murals have prompted discussions about the purpose and reception of public art, while reminding us of the importance of artistic freedom and the power the arts to inspire. Keep an eye out for more murals along the way!

11. 17th Street Farmers Market | 100 North 17th Street

Long before the arrival of colonizers, Native people used this area for trade. Later, the presence of the creek in this valley allowed the colonists to continue the tradition by bringing goods up from the river via small boats. As a result, the 17th Street Farmers Market is one of the oldest public markets in America.

For Virginia's Indigenous people, arrival of the colonists brought the loss of freedom, years of war and forced removal from their lands. Prior to the Civil Rights movement and resulting legislation, the basic civil liberties of Native People were denied to them, including the right to practice, protect and preserve their religion, languages and cultural practices.

12. Main Street Station | 1500 East Main Street

Main Street Station is a beautiful representation of the freedom of transportation at the turn of the 20th century. The station was built in 1901 in the Beaux Arts Style. The clock tower is 110 feet tall, and each clock face is 9 feet in diameter. The 100,000 square foot train shed is one of the last surviving train sheds in the country. Today, you can still travel via Amtrak from this station.

13. The Devil's Half-Acre and African Burial Ground

This site, known as the Devil's Half Acre or Lumpkin's Jail, was an infamous prison where hundreds of enslaved people were confined and tortured as they waited sale in Richmond's slave markets. Following the Civil War, a Baptist Minister leased the property to turn it into a school for formerly enslaved people, which would eventually become Virginia Union University.

Directly north from this site (through the tunnel) is the site of the burial ground for free and enslaved African-Americans during the 18th century. The land was also used for public executions, including the hanging of Gabriel, an enslaved blacksmith who attempted to organize a large-scale revolution against the system of slavery in 1800. After a number of uses over the years, including a school site and dump, the land was most recently used as a parking lot until activists began the work of reclaiming this sacred space.

14. Richmond Reconciliation Statue | North 15th and East Main Streets

The Richmond Reconciliation Statue, aka "Triangle," was created in 2007 in recognition of Richmond's role in the slave trade. Identical statues are located in Liverpool, England, and the Republic of Benin in West Africa, sites forming the triangle of the Atlantic slave trade.

About a block up 15th Street was the first location of Richmond's Universalist Unitarian Church, built in 1833. In 1862 the minister, Rev. Alden Bosserman, was arrested under suspicion of working with abolitionists to smuggle Union soldiers and enslaved individuals North. The Reverend and several church officials were imprisoned in Lumpkin's Jail for months.

15. Kahal Kadosh Beth Shalome Historical Marker

Just four years after the passage of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, nearly 100 Jews had settled in Richond. Members of the community founded Kahal Kadosh Beth Shalome (Holy Congregation House of Peace), the first Jewish congregation in Virginia. Temporary sites housed Beth Shalome until a synagogue was built on this site in 1822.