

On to Richmond: Got a day, or two, or three?

Richmond, Va. –

One day in Richmond

Get the lay of the land, starting with the official Gateway to the Civil War at Tredegar.

Two Civil War institutions on the riverfront -- the American Civil War Center at Historic Tredegar and the Richmond National Battlefield Park's Civil War Visitor Center -- have joined forces with the Richmond Metropolitan Convention and Visitors Bureau to introduce visitors to the city near a spot scouted out by English explorers from Jamestown in 1607.

By the time of the Civil War, the area near the river was the industrial heart of the city, with water wheels powering flour mills and the Tredegar Iron Works. The iron foundry made more than 1,000 cannons for the Confederacy and milled armor plating for the Confederate ship that participated in the first battle of ironclads. (Tredegar continued to make munitions through World War II.)

Now, two surviving Tredegar buildings have been adapted to give perspective on the Civil War.

The American Civil War Center takes the broad view, examining the war from the perspectives of the North, the South and African Americans.

The Richmond National Battlefield Visitor Center orients visitors to 13 battlefields where some of the most momentous fighting of the war took place. At Gaines Mill, the site of the biggest of the Seven Days Battles in 1862, Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee led his first major charge, bigger than Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg, and won his first victory. If Lee had lost, the war might have ended three years earlier -- without abolishing slavery because Lincoln had not yet issued his Emancipation Proclamation.

For lunch, take your pick of downtown spots. Indulge yourself in the five-star elegance of The Jefferson Hotel. Eat on the cheap from Christopher's Runaway Gourmay or other sidewalk carts on Main between Eighth and 12th streets. Let Cary Street's cobblestones in Shockoe Slip guide you to a variety of cuisines, ranging from imaginatively embellished hot dogs to an Irish pub, Chinese pavilion or casual fine dining in a converted tobacco warehouse.

If you're staying longer than a day, an afternoon on the riverfront could take in the Canal Walk, a canal boat ride or a walk across a suspended bridge to Belle Isle, once the location of a notorious Civil War prison and now a great vantage point for watching kayakers attack the river rapids. On Brown's Island, walk out on a river overlook devoted to the 1865 burning of the city.

If a day is all you have, use the afternoon to sample some of the other must-see spots. Walk (or drive, since it's uphill to Bank Street) to the State Capitol, designed by Thomas Jefferson, to see the marble statue of George Washington in his military uniform -- with a button missing because that's the way it was when Jean-Antoine Houdon took the measurements from life. Drive east to Church Hill to see the oldest part of the city and St. John's Church, where Patrick Henry gave his "Give me liberty or give me death" speech.

Come back through Shockoe Bottom, where "The Devil's Half Acre" -- Lumpkin's Jail -- was just one of the slave markets hidden below the Capitol, then pause at the Reconciliation statue to reflect.

Driving west through downtown on Broad Street, turn right on Second Street then left on Leigh Street to get a sense of African-American achievers in Jackson Ward. The Maggie L. Walker National Historic Site honors the first black female bank president in the United States. The Bill "Bojangles" Robinson statue honors the Richmond-born tap dancer and actor.

West of downtown, drive along Monument Avenue, a National Historic Landmark itself, to see statues of Confederate Civil War heroes and tennis great Arthur Ashe between Lombardy Street and Roseneath Road. Make a loop through Hollywood Cemetery above the river rapids to see the gravesites of Presidents James Monroe and John Tyler, Confederate President Jefferson Davis, and a granite pyramid built to honor 18,000 Confederate soldiers.

Two days in Richmond

For your second day, take an organized tour of the city. It could be the daily City Center walking tour led by Historic Richmond Tours from the visitor center on Third Street, a Segway Richmond Landmark Tour, a bus tour, a canal boat tour or a self-guided tour of the Richmond Slave Trail or Civil War Trails following brochures and signs.

Before or after your tour, explore Richmond as the capital of the state and the Confederacy. Enter the State Capitol at the bottom of the hill on Bank Street, where a recent expansion added museum space, a gift shop and a restaurant. One of the prize artifacts on view is a model of the Roman temple Maison

Carrée in Nimes, which Thomas Jefferson sent from France to make sure the Virginians understood what he wanted them to build.

Upstairs, free tours give background on the building, its artifacts and important events such as Aaron Burr's treason trial and Robert E. Lee's commission to lead the Confederacy's Army of Northern Virginia.

Walk a few blocks to the Museum and White House of the Confederacy for the largest collection of Confederate artifacts in the world and the restored house where Jefferson Davis lived during the Confederacy. More than half of the home's furnishings are original, even though the building was used as a school and museum before being reconverted into a house.

Wall coverings are authentically and wildly Victorian -- red flocked wallpaper in the parlor and a dizzy dance of botanical carpet and floral wallpaper in the children's room upstairs. Tragedies there were personal as well as political. Davis' young son died after falling from the porch. The home's first official tourist was President Abraham Lincoln, who visited April 4, 1865, two days after evacuating Confederates set fire to the city and five days before Lee surrendered at Appomattox.

For lunch near the Capitol, try Padow's in the Historic Ironfronts on Main for genuine Smithfield ham biscuits or deli sandwiches. Lunch at Café Richmond (reopening Oct. 4) can be nice in the garden of the Valentine Richmond History Center, another worthwhile stop just a block from the Museum and White House of the Confederacy. The café at the Library of Virginia on Broad at Ninth Street features food from Positive Vibe, a nonprofit eatery that trains and supports people with disabilities to help prepare and serve food under the direction of a locally renowned chef.

Three days in Richmond

With a third day, you can spread your wings.

Tour Civil War battlefields around Richmond on an 80-mile route that encompasses two major campaigns to capture the city, neither of them successful.

Travel south to Petersburg National Battlefield to learn about the nine-month siege of the city and the Battle of the Crater. Continue to Pamplin Historical Park for a museum where you can choose a soldier (one of whom was an African American in the 29th Connecticut Infantry) and experience the war from that individual's perspective.

The breakthrough battle at Pamplin is one of the few documented cases where brother fought brother - and this one was documented by Walt Whitman, who met both as they lay dying in a Washington hospital. After Petersburg was captured, the Confederate government evacuated Richmond without a battle but in a blaze of fires set by retreating troops to burn supply warehouses. Union soldiers helped extinguish the flames.

For history in context, head to the Boulevard for the Virginia Historical Society. It will have the signature exhibit of Virginia's sesquicentennial commemoration, "An American Turning Point," opening Feb. 4, in addition to its usual comprehensive and engrossing examination of the state's past.

Take in a bit of art history next door at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, which vaulted into the top 10 of the nation's comprehensive art museums this year with its reopening in an expanded building. Civil War drawings from American artist-reporter Joseph Becker and colleagues will be on display Jan. 15 to April 3.

If historic homes appeal, choices include pre-Revolutionary War plantation houses along the James River on state Route 5 to the east; 15th and 16th-century English homes -- Agecroft and Virginia House -- reconstructed in Richmond as homes in the 1920s; and the Gilded Age Maymont mansion and gardens beside the river. The Italian and Japanese gardens at Maymont are an attraction in themselves on a nice day.

Take in the Revolutionary past with a tour of St. John's Church. On Sunday afternoons in season, you can hear a re-enactment of Patrick Henry's speech. Follow his life story on the Road to Revolution trail through Hanover County.

Walk around "The Harlem of the South," Jackson Ward, also a National Historic Landmark District. Take time to go inside the Maggie L. Walker National Historic Site, the Black History Museum and Cultural Center of Virginia, and Sixth Mount Zion Baptist Church.

Explore the riverfront. Along the Canal Walk, Box Brown Plaza is named after the slave who successfully shipped himself in a box to freedom in Philadelphia. A reproduction of the box shows the actual dimensions.

By now, you're probably wondering how all this will fit in three days. The answer is, it won't. And that may be the reason for another secret about Richmond. If you come here once, you'll probably come again. -- Katherine Calos