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# BLKRVA: The vibe is alive in Richmond, Virginia

*Michael J. Solender*

10–12 minutes

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Mending Walls RVA is a public art project that brings together artists from different cultures and backgrounds to create murals that address societal issues and moving forward through understanding and collaboration. Artist Khalid Thompson is one of dozens of participating artists.

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Richmond, Virginia's renaissance and rebirth over the past decade have vaulted this city into an echelon of New South destinations, where the celebration and veneration of Black history, culture and community drive core elements of a visitor's experience.

[BLKRVA](#), the collaborative initiative between [Richmond Regional Tourism](#) and dozens of community leaders, has helped spotlight recaptured narratives that reframe Richmond as a multicultural hub where African Americans' deep and significant historical roots

are at the very foundation of the promise of this city's future.

Richmond's Black stories are our nation's stories. The city was once the center of America's domestic slave trade and yields the calculus that 1 in 4 African Americans today can trace their ancestry to centuries-old slave ships that berthed here. Today's tellers, however, begin with uplift, promise and the joy in traditions brought from their African ancestors and the economic, artistic, culinary, political and spiritual power that enlivens the Richmond community.

Follow along to learn the historical, cultural and culinary wonders Richmond revealed to travel writer, Michael J. Solender, on a recent expedition for DETOUR:

## **Jackson Ward**

The city's fabled [Jackson Ward](#), often monikered the Harlem of the South, is at the epicenter of Black culture and serves a key role in understanding Black history as well as political and economic success in Richmond.

There's no better introduction to the neighborhood than through [Walking the Ward with Gary Flowers](#). Flowers, a Richmond native, self-proclaimed history nerd and unofficial mayor of Jackson Ward, is greeted by virtually everyone who crosses his path throughout the two-hour, 20-stop walking tour. Highlighted on the tour are historic educational, economic, religious and social institutions, the personalities behind them and the untold stories of how Jackson Ward came to be known as both the *Black Wall Street and Harlem of the South*.

Flowers excels at providing the historical context and backstories

that have long been willfully suppressed for a counternarrative that fails to notice the contributions of the Black population throughout Richmond's past. "We're reclaiming our history," Flowers said. Throughout his tour, Flowers notes Jackson Ward's central role in the upliftment and development of the local Black community's economic and social power. "By 1900, Jackson Ward boasted 300 Black-owned businesses, seven Black-owned insurance companies and five Black-owned banks," Flowers said.

Tour-goers learn of Virginia's Dovell Act — legislation where the state provided funding for Black residents to afford out-of-state tuition rather than desegregate funding for in-state colleges or universities. They're also introduced to notable Black residents, such as [Bill "Bojangles" Robinson](#), who used his own funds to purchase and install a stoplight at a heavily trafficked intersection where Black children were struck, injured or worse due to the neglect of white city officials. Tales of the power couple — also business and civic leaders — Maggie and Armstead Walker, highlight Flowers' commentary.

[Maggie Walker](#)'s home is of special significance as it allows for a fuller telling of "the most unheralded woman in American history," Flowers said. Walker was the first woman (Black or white) to charter a bank in America. She also owned and published the St. Luke Herald, founded the Lily Black political party and was a political and economic force serving on the national board of the NAACP.

## **Black History Museum & Cultural Center of Virginia**

[Richmond's Black History Museum & Cultural Center of Virginia](#) is housed in the lovingly renovated Leigh St. Armory in Jackson

Ward. The structure was built in 1895 to support the African American militia established there. “Our mission is to preserve stories that inspire,” Mary Lauderdale, director of collections, said. “Our permanent exhibition covers emancipation through reconstruction, the Jim Crow Era, Brown V. BOE, civil rights and contemporary history. We also feature traveling and internally curated exhibitions highlighting individuals who’ve made contributions to Virginia and America.”

The Forging Freedom, Justice and Equality is the current 40th anniversary special exhibition (through April 2023) bringing visitors into a personalized journey of the Black experience in Virginia through displays of military life, arts, entertainment, commerce, education and sports, including a model of the Arthur Ashe statue.

## **ELEGBA Folklore Society**

[Elegba](#) has earned the title of Richmond’s cultural ambassador, operating for more than 30 years and bringing African programming, tours, performances, education, fine arts, literature, music and storytelling to the entire community. Elegba’s president and artistic director, Janine Bell, was selected by the city in 2019 as a Richmond History maker and brings her vibrant spirit, deep cultural knowledge and positive energy to all who visit the art-adorned cultural center on East Broad street.

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Elegba Folklore Society founder, president and artistic director Janine Bell was selected by the city in 2019 as a Richmond History maker and brings her vibrant spirit, deep cultural knowledge, and positive energy to all who visit the art adorned cultural center on East Broad Street. Photo by Clement Britt,

courtesy of Richmond Region Tourism

## **Institute for Contemporary Art**

Virginia Commonwealth University's Institute for Contemporary Art (ICA) anchors Richmond's Arts District — an eclectic grouping of more than a dozen galleries along Broad Street — and gets visitors up close and personal with regional, national and international artists through a series of curated traveling exhibitions as they are a non-collective institution.

New York photographer, artist and educator, Naima Green, exhibits her multimedia show, *I Keep Missing My Water*, which is viewable through Feb. 17, 2023. These works explore intimacy within Black and queer communities and take the viewer on a lush exploration through a series of videos, portraits and narratives revealing moments of desire, aching, tenderness and ambiguity.

## **Soul food and beyond**

Touring Richmond is sure to leave visitors hungry. Explore these signature spots on your next trip through this historic city:

[Mama J's](#): A Richmond institution and the queen of soul food, Mama J's is smack-yourself good. Located in the heart of Jackson Ward, Mama J's offers cooking our mama wished she could put out. Catfish, fried chicken, pork chops, brisket, ribs, crab cakes and trout star at the center of each plate while sides include mac n' cheese, collard greens, string beans, candied yams, potato salad and more. Leave room for dessert, though, as the peach cobbler is the bomb.

[Southern Kitchen](#): Just across the street from Maggie Walker's

Jackson Ward residence (now museum), Southern Kitchen welcomes guests from all over the city and beyond. From their extra special salmon cakes, fried okra, oysters, shrimp po' boys, chicken liver and onions, and turkey wings, Southern Kitchen has food for the soul.

[Hatch Local](#): This newly opened restaurant incubator/food hall brings love to Richmond's rising Manchester neighborhood with seven quick service eateries (three are minority owned), including Odyssey Fish, Bully Burger, Fat Kid Sandwiches, Royal Pig, Buttermilk and Honey, Beet Box and Sincero. "We give minority business owners an opportunity to do what they do," Braxton Kemp, Hatch Local general manager said. "They bring their crowd, and everyone enjoys the mix. It's a beautiful vision of what Richmond can be."

[ML Steak Modern Chop House](#): Chef operator Mike Lindsey has got it going on. The serial restaurateur behind Lindsey Food Group has Richmonders enjoying his eats all over town, including Buttermilk and Honey, Lillie Pearl and Bully Burger. His latest upscale endeavor, ML Steak Modern Chop House, delivers the goods with prime beef, lamb chops, glorious seafood entrees, slick service, stiff drinks and a welcoming vibe. "There's no place I'd rather be doing business than right here in Richmond," says Lindsey. Richmond residents are very glad that he feels that way.

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*Michael J. Solender is a Charlotte, N.C.-based journalist. His work has been featured at The New York Times, Smithsonian Magazine, Metropolis Magazine, Salvation South, Southern Living, Charlotte magazine, NASCAR Illustrated, American City Business*

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