

The Eye of the Storm: Civil War Richmond

Industry & Commerce Walking Tour



Introduction

This tour begins at the public entrance to the Virginia Capitol and will head south toward the James River. It should take a little more than an hour to walk. Allow time for visits to the museums at the American Civil War Center/Tredegar Iron Works and a trip to Belle Isle.

The city's manufacturing capability made Richmond "the only truly indispensable city in the Confederacy," according to one historian, and was a major factor in choosing Richmond as the Southern capital in the spring of 1861.

During the Civil War, the streets just below us, Main and Cary, bustled with commerce. Shops, banks, newspaper offices, hotels and other businesses did a brisk business there.

Only two buildings on this tour — the old Customs House directly in front of you and the Tredegar Iron Works' gun foundry — survive from the Civil War era. The 1865 Evacuation Fire destroyed virtually every building from here to the river. So some imagination is required for this tour.



Virginia Capitol, Visitor Entrance

1 Customs House/ Confederate executive offices

1100 E. Main St.

(You are viewing the Bank Street side from Capital Square)

1858

Built in 1858 as the U.S. Customs House, this building was taken over by the state almost immediately after Virginia seceded, then by Confederate authorities.

As the war began, the building housed recruits and military offices and briefly confined prisoners of war from the earliest battles. When the Confederate government arrived, the building was converted into offices for the President and the Treasury and State departments.

Since the war, the building has changed considerably with additions to each side and another floor on top. This is the only Main Street survivor in the core area of the 1865 Evacuation Fire.

Following the war, the building was returned to Federal use. Jefferson Davis, who was imprisoned at Fort Monroe after his capture in Georgia, returned here in 1867 to answer an indictment for treason. He was freed on bail

here during a court hearing. Among those helping to free him was New York newspaper editor Horace Greeley. The indictment was later withdrawn. The building currently houses the Fourth Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals.



The Customs House April 1865

As you make your way south toward the James River, take a look at a small remnant of Richmond history: Basin Street. This cobblestone street once ran along the northern edge of the turning basin on the James River and Kanawha Canal system (more about that at Stop 2.) See the cobblestones in the parking lot between Eighth and Ninth streets just south of Cary Street.

2 The Canals and the Evacuation Fire

Kanawha Plaza

Entrance on Canal Street at the base of Eighth Street (turn to face downtown buildings)



The turning basin in 1865 with the Capitol in the background.

The James River and Kanawha Canal with its great turning basin (once between here and downtown) was a focal point of Richmond commerce before the war. Although railroads were gradually eroding the canal's influence, Richmond's wartime industry continued to depend on this and other man-made waterways to transport goods and provide power.

The James River canal, which continued more than 180 miles west from Richmond, provided a cheap and efficient way to transport the raw materials that fueled Confederate



The same vantage point, 21st century.

wartime production at such factories at the Tredegar Iron Works.

If we were standing here during the early morning hours of April 3, 1865, we would be in the middle of a major conflagration known as the Evacuation Fire. The wind-blown fire, set by retreating Confederates (intended to burn only a limited number of public warehouses) got out of hand and destroyed much of the city's commercial district, including virtually every building within several blocks in all directions from here.

Confederate authorities, including President Davis and some of his cabinet officers, had escaped the city just hours earlier, leaving the city to mob rule.

Union soldiers entered the out-of-control city later that morning and began to restore order and put out the fires. Much of Richmond's industrial and commercial district lay in ruins.

The Confederate troops who evacuated Richmond continued southwest, joining the rest of Lee's army on the roads that led to Appomattox. The Army of Northern Virginia surrendered less than a week after Richmond's fall.

A little of the canal remains in three locations: See an outline of the James River and Kanawha Canal etched on the floor of the James Center building on Cary Street between 13th and 14th streets. The rough-hewn stones lining the small park at 12th and Cary streets were once part of the canal walls. Locks on the old canal are preserved along Richmond's Canal Walk under the Downtown Expressway off 12th Street.

The Evacuation Fire

When Confederate authorities left town in the late evening and early morning April 2–3, 1865, mob rule took hold downtown.

"The story of that night can never be told. Possibly I come nearest to a picture of it in declaring that it was a night in which there was absolutely no law," remembered one Richmond resident years later. "The old authority was gone and the new one had not come. It was a time when only passion and fury uttered their voices and when liberty met riot and violence. The very streets roared with shriek and curse, with howl and menace and with the insanity of countless crowds."

An estimated 800–1,000 buildings were burned in 20 square blocks during the Evacuation Fire, leaving smoking ruins, blackened walls and rubble cascading onto the streets. Local ministers wryly noted that all the banks burned, but only one church.

3

Brown's Island

(Stop on the pedestrian bridge at the base of Seventh Street and face the James River)



You are now standing in the middle of the pedestrian bridge leading to Brown's Island, beginning a visit to the most important military industrial complex in the Confederacy. More than 1,000 cannon, thousands of rifles, and millions of shells and cartridges were produced for the Confederate war effort in the few acres surrounding you.

This pedestrian bridge spans the restored Haxall Canal, which diverted James River water to power a flour mill (which once stood to your left).

Brown's Island in front of you was the site of the "Confederate Laboratory," a facility composed of small frame buildings where gunpowder was loaded into cartridges. An explosion here in March 1863 (on Friday the 13th) killed dozens.



As you walk on the island toward the James River, be sure to read the bronze markers embedded in the walkways. Many are devoted to Civil War history. And be sure to visit the river overlook devoted to the 1865 fall of Richmond. (The entrance is near the river under the railroad trestle, just off the main path around the island.)

Girls and young women at the Confederate Laboratory filled cartridges and boxed percussion caps and friction primers. An investigation of the March 13, 1863, explosion showed that Mary Ryan, an 18-year-old Irish immigrant, was filling a friction primer when it stuck to a board and she struck the board repeatedly to free the primer — the result being the sky-high explosion. Mary died the Monday after the incident. Funerals went on for days and weeks after.

Since the war continued unabated following the explosion, the laboratory was back in full operation by late May 1863, with the destroyed buildings replaced and new safeguards in place.

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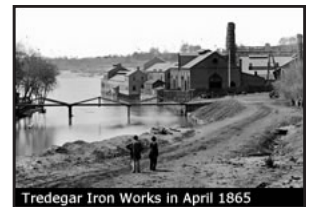
Tredegar Iron Works



These few acres by the James River were arguably the most important manufacturing center in the Confederacy.

During the war, the Tredegar Iron Works produced 1,099 cannon for the Southern cause. The facility rolled most of the iron plating that protected the CSS Virginia (former USS Merrimack) during its famous battle with the USS Monitor. A mysterious submarine (fate unknown) also was built here for the Confederates.

The building complex and grounds now comprise the American Civil War Center at Historic Tredegar. The Richmond National Battlefield Park operates a visitor center and museum in the three-story building. The 1861 cannon foundry (with the big smokestack) now houses the "In the Cause of Liberty" exhibit.



The NPS visitor center/museum offers maps and other information about the Richmond-area Civil War battlefields (including Cold Harbor, Gaines' Mill and others.) A film and exhibits focus on Richmond during the war. It's open 9 am–5 pm daily. It's free.

The "In the Cause of Liberty" exhibit offers a wider view of the Civil War, covering all aspects of the conflict from three points of view: Union, Confederate and African-American. It's also open daily 9 am–5 pm. There is an admission charge. Parking is available on site for a fee, refundable if you pay to see the "In the Cause of Liberty" exhibit.

Because of the access to water and the advent of the James River and Kanawha Canal, this area has been one of the preferred locations for Richmond's industry since the early 1800s. The Tredegar Iron Works (named for a similar Welsh company) was established here in 1837.

Prior to the war, the Tredegar turned out heavy artillery, shot and shell for the U.S. military and supplied all sorts of fabricated goods for railroads and other clients across the country.

At its peak early in the war, the Tredegar employed 2,500 people, including slaves and free blacks. The operation is sometimes compared to a plantation with the company supplying shelter and food for its employees, slave and free. Later in the war, with labor shortages becoming severe, an estimated half of the Tredegar workers were black.

Labor shortages and the gradual disappearance of raw materials was a problem that became more acute as the war progressed. By late 1862, the plant was running at only one-third capacity.

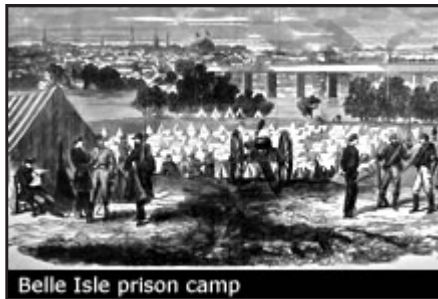
Tredegar employees protected the facility from mobs aiming to destroy it as Richmond fell in April 1865. The place was back up and running within a few months.

The Tredegar Iron Works continued as a Richmond business into the 1950s. The abandoned buildings here were restored in the 1980s.

5 Belle Isle

You can see Belle Isle, a large island in the James river, from the Tredegar Iron Works. A pedestrian walkway to the island is located under the U.S. Route 1 bridge and is open daylight hours.

One of the most notorious Civil War prisons was located on the eastern tip of this island. Opened as an enlisted man's prison camp following the Seven Days Battles in 1862, the island quickly filled with thousands of captured Union soldiers who were housed initially in tents.



The prisoner population of the Belle Isle camp ebbed and flowed with the course of the war. The island was sometimes deserted, sometimes overwhelmed with prisoners captured during major campaigns and battles.

At times, prisoners suffered horribly from overcrowding, exposure (most of the tents were long gone by 1863), disease, and lack of proper food. According to prisoner William Lee Goss, the daily ration "consisted of one half loaf to each man per day, and beans, cooked in water in which bacon had been boiled for the guards, — usually containing about twenty percent of maggots,... thirty

percent of beans and the remainder in water."

A 3-foot-deep ditch and an earthwork enclosed the prison compound. Prisoners wandering outside the "dead line" without permission were liable to be shot. Guards and an artillery piece were posted overlooking the camp on high ground just west of the prison.

The most often quoted number of Belle Isle residents at one time or another during the war is 30,000. The estimated numbers of dead vary widely, but 1,000 seems to be the most common number. More probably died later, after being weakened by confinement.

Today the island is accessible during daylight hours via the pedestrian bridge from the north bank of the James River.

Years ago the outline of the Civil War prison camp was identified and a small earthen berm was placed above it. Some of that modern-day berm can be seen today.

Long before the Civil War, famous architect and artist Benjamin Latrobe described Belle Isle as "a beautiful, fertile and romantic spot," and hoped one day to live out his life there. But soon after Latrobe wrote those words the character of the island began to change.

Quarry operations and light manufacturing took hold in the 19th century and, by the time of the Civil War, the Old Dominion Iron and Nail Works was one of the largest producers of nails in the country.

Confederate authorities never expected men to stay on Belle Isle for long. The camp was too close to the front, and feeding the prisoners (always badly and never enough) strained Richmond's already diminished resources.

But the prisoner exchange system eventually broke down and overworked Confederate transportation systems proved unable to move all the men to camps farther south. So prisoners stacked up at the Belle Isle camp.

Many of the dead from the Belle Isle prison are buried in the National Cemetery on Williamsburg Road east of the city.