

Introduction

Richmond is my Muse. She is beauty suspended. And in the first light of day or the dying embers of night, she croons wild old stories that are neither here nor there but somewhere in between, almost impossible to believe but tantalizingly close, like the first discoveries of childhood along a river roiling with adventure.

Richmond is an irregular place, impossible to explain except by stepping into the shoes of her past and walking apiece, over old cobbles and trestles, past haunts and hidden alleys, down by the old locks and dams, and then up again, always up, like Phoenix rising from the ashes, moderately well-behaved but still a touch wild, untrammelled, like a story just preening to be told.



Richmond is Paradise, neither flat nor peaked, but hilly. So much better to draw us up from the troughs and pitch us, rolling like children, over the top. She is a perch above the fray, a place to ponder the contours of our sweetly crooked paths.

To be sure, Richmond is elusive too, like the seabed exposed or the sky upturned, each cloud a little summit that wisps away before our eyes.

For many years, we laid claim to the notion that Richmond, like Rome, was built on seven hills. We had believers far and near, from *Compton's Picture Encyclopedia* to *National Geographic Magazine*. In 1913, our "city of seven hills" made chapter 7 of

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Edward Hungerford's *The Personality of American Cities*, where we were neatly tucked between Washington, D.C., as the "American Mecca," and Charleston, South Carolina, "where romance and courtesies do not forget."

The spirit of our urban myth hit its zenith in 1937, when City councilman John Hirschberg, also known as "Little Father Byrd," introduced an ordinance that would have made our seven hills law. In this ordinance, he named them as Church, Union, Shockoe, Gamble's, Navy, French Garden, and Council Chamber. But alas, our Little Father faced unexpected opposition from the nine-member council. Why, you ask? Because seven is not neatly divisible by nine, and each councilman wanted a hill for his constituency.

There were surely plenty to choose from, as hills abound in our fair City. The *News Leader* came up with 67 hills in 1952, among them Buck, Goat, Dead Man, and Poor House – all hills best left in the closet.

In defense of our erstwhile council, a hill by any other name may be a better hill. Take Church Hill, also known as Indian, Richmond, and Town Hill. Or Union Hill, which was formed by leveling and then reappointing Doen's and Stricker Hill.

In a twist of irony almost too sweet for history, our tallest hill actually has no name at all. It sits at a lonely 312 feet alongside the corner of Patterson and Three Chopt.

There is good reason to claim affinity with Rome, to celebrate our hills, and cherish our not-so-ordinary urban myths. There is even better reason to climb a few, to rise above the fray if only for a few moments, and align the contours of our sweetly crooked paths. After all, said the good poet Frost, "[Paradise] gives its glimpses only to those not in position to look too close."