

# Richmond in the First Person

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*With a heritage going back from Edgar Allan Poe to Ellen Glasgow to Douglas Southall Freeman all the way up to Patricia Cornwell, Richmond is a writer's town, so we asked some of our favorite contemporary scribes in the city to give us their takes on the Gem on the James..*

## Lost & Found

By Maureen L. Egan

*A couple of wrong turns yields a new way of life for a Richmond transplant*

I have an excellent sense of direction, I swear, but I moved to Richmond because I got lost. Since I had no destination and, after hours of wandering, found my way back to the downtown hotel where I was staying, never once asking for directions, technically I wasn't lost — just continuously unaware of where the hell I was.

It was February 1992, my first visit to Richmond. My husband and I had driven up the night before from South Carolina with our children for a quick lay-of-the-land tour.

Back then we lived in (no matter the hundreds of churches it had) a God-forsaken town in the sandy middle of South Carolina. When the time came to leave there after three long years, I was ready to settle in Times Square.

Instead Richmond became a possibility. What we knew about Richmond I could sum up in silence. It was enough that it was closer to our families up north and contained buildings other than fast-food restaurants.

My son, who was 4, had two requirements for our next home: He wanted a house with stairs, and he wanted it to snow there. I wanted jobs, schools and recreation possibilities nearby, and I wanted good ice-cream availability. My husband wanted a job that wouldn't make me hate him. My 1-year-old daughter was flexible (for the only time in her life.)

We pulled into downtown late on a cold night, grumpy that all four of us would be sleeping (or not) in one room, and nervous about the next day. Here was my chance to find a place north of depression, just south of utopia. I knew I wasn't really looking for a house the next morning — that would have been easy enough. I was looking for a life.

We woke up to snow outside. That's Southern hospitality. My husband headed to his job interview, and I took the car and kids on an unguided tour. A woman at the hotel suggested I drive Broad Street. (Even in 1992 that wasn't the way to wow a newcomer.) I thought I'd buy a map at a gas station and plan a route, but by the time I spotted a gas station, the kids were sound asleep. I wasn't about to wake them up just to find out where I was going.

Though Broad Street wasn't sending me come-hither looks, still I headed west. I guess it's an American thing. Turning

onto side streets didn't help since I knew I didn't want to live close to a main road, and I was afraid to veer far from the one road I knew the name of. Finally I was so exasperated by my useless

reconnoitering that I ventured a left and plowed ahead. I was getting nowhere, but at least the kids were still asleep.

In my agitation, there was something comforting about all the stoplights. I'm from Montgomery County, Md., where the concept of going somewhere is inextricably linked with being stuck at a light, so I felt more at home in the Saturday going-to-mall traffic than I ever had in small-town South Carolina. At one light I noticed that the road had decided to change names. Immediately it morphed into a highway (gulp) that crossed a river (huh?) with no obvious exits (expletive) and no houses (or high-end malls) in sight (moron).

Crossing a river I didn't know existed (Jamestown and all that didn't rate a mention in my Maryland elementary school) blasted me out of my lethargy. I turned into the first neighborhood I saw. All of a sudden, I didn't mind meandering. Everywhere I looked I saw mature trees and varied, older homes on hills with kids playing out in the melting snow. Southern charm, indeed.

I looped around and, just before panic set in, saw a sign for Parham Road, and drove downtown the way I had come. Nowadays you couldn't pay me to drive from Stratford Hills to downtown via Chippenham, Parham and Broad, but it was the only way I knew then to get from where I didn't know I was to where I thought the hotel should be.

I almost felt sorry for the Realtor that the prospective employer set us up with that afternoon. By then I had bought a map and deduced where I had wandered — south of the river, intriguingly close to a park. That poor Realtor. I had seen the promised land of an established neighborhood near a riverside park, and she was pushing the desert of new development near strip malls.

Later, when I realized that first-time buyers like us could afford a house (stairs included) within walking distance of the Pony Pasture, where we could walk, bike, canoe, climb on big rocks, and splash in a river, we didn't look anywhere else. We were used to sand and swamps. This sounded like a full-service resort. The cities we were considering up north couldn't compete with that. So whether or not I was lost, 12 years later I like what I found.

*Maureen Egan's essays have appeared in The Christian Science Monitor, Troika, and 64. She has lived half of her adult life in Richmond and can't quite believe it.*