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High on the Hill

It's grappled with segregation, urban renewal, public housing and racial reconciliation. A community of change, Church Hill embraces its identity and looks to the future.

BY [JOHN MURDEN](#)

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Scott Elmquist

Don Coleman, the pastor of East End Fellowship and a member of the Richmond School Board, looks out at the city from Jefferson Park. He's among those trying to build community amid change in Church Hill.

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Don Coleman puts the beginning of Church Hill's last decline around 1979. He was a student at the old Armstrong High on 31st Street. It was his senior year — the year heroin and crack became a part of the neighborhood and “you started seeing the guys out on the block.”

Coleman was living at Chimborazo Village, a now-demolished apartment complex at 35th and Marshall, home to people he describes as “solid, decent, working-class folks.” Among them were Lottie and George Byrd, the couple who took in and fostered Coleman and his four brothers and sisters.

The decline of the street and the loss of working people were the story of black Church Hill for the next two decades. “What hurt the East End was the exodus of the black middle class,” Coleman says. What remained, he says, was “a disproportionate number of people living in poverty without enough black middle class to engage with.”

As Church Hill fell, the rest of the city went with it. Richmond well may have bottomed out in 1994. One city councilman went into rehab for his heroin problem. Another was in hot water for renting out condemned property. Enrollment at Virginia Commonwealth University dropped. The city recorded the nation's 19th largest population decline since 1980. Richmond made the wrong end of Money Magazine's “Best Places to Live” list. By the end of 1994, the city had tallied a record 161

homicides. In 1993 and 1994, the East End alone accounted for 75 murders.

Coleman left the area for a while, but he came back in 1995 and moved into a newly built house on Mosby Street. Now a pastor at East End Fellowship and the School Board representative for the East End's 7th District, Coleman is one central piece in the mosaic of change he hoped to one day see in Church Hill.

It's that change — what should propel it, what it should look like, how sweeping it should be — that's sparked recent neighborhood disputes so passionate that they've made news. In August a majority of the Church Hill Association board resigned. The seven members who left have declined to say anything publicly about their decision beyond what they wrote in a joint letter of resignation. In it, they cited a heightened atmosphere of "vitriol and animosity" resulting from debate about two projects.

One is a condominium development at Pear and Main streets just south of Church Hill in Shockoe Bottom. The proposal is working its way through the city Planning Commission. Like an earlier plan, at dispute is what construction of a 13-story building at the foot of Libby Hill would do to the view of the James River. This isn't just a pretty view. It's the view that named Richmond because of its resemblance to a bend in the river at Richmond upon Thames in London. Project supporters want the density and new city residents. Opponents want to protect the park's historic panoramic view.

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Scott Elmquist

Metro Richmond tour guide Emily D. King discusses the history of the Libby Hill overlook to a group from Britain.

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The other debate is over Bob Buffington, or specifically his coffee shop. When Buffington opened Captain Buzzy's in 2004, not much else was in the area. That's no longer true, and with the increased competition he wants to stay open an extra hour until 10 p.m. and offer beer and wine.

Critics of that change want to preserve the residential feel of the neighborhood and are leery of what might come next to the spot if Buffington wins zoning exemptions he needs. Buffington's supporters say he isn't asking for anything more than what other restaurants and bakeries in the neighborhood are allowed to do.

I've watched all of this take place as a former resident of the neighborhood, who taught at its middle school and publishes the community news blog, Church Hill People's News. My wife, Kendra Feather, co-owns WPA Bakery and the Roosevelt, both of which opened in the area within the last two years. I'm not disinterested, but I'm not here to make an argument. Or, if I'm making one, it's this: Look more closely.

What some people might see simply as a permitting issue or a river view isn't all that simple. Part of the intensity of these disputes, part of their fervent — and perhaps outsized — passion, is the knowledge of how far Church Hill has come.

With that understanding comes the equal knowledge that if this gentrifying neighborhood loses its connection to its working- and middle-class roots, to its African-American past, a vital part of its identity will be lost. This is a debate about the future, and debates about where we're going are almost always debates about where we've been — especially in this city.

The official city map of neighborhoods says Church Hill is roughly a 6- by 11-block area around St. John's Church. Wrapping around Libby Hill Park and stretching north to Marshall, historic Church Hill is at its core an unblemished collection of 19th-century masonry houses, some dating to the very early 1800s. One of the oldest neighborhoods in the city, Church Hill is where a small church on a hill in a city of only a few hundred became permanently embedded in American history when the Second Virginia Convention met there in March 1775.

There's also a greater Church Hill, made up of a number of other neighborhoods that lie north in a patchwork and spread out another mile or so. Each has its own history, architecture and nuance. Along with Church Hill proper these are neighborhoods both buffeted and epitomized by what happened to urban communities in the 20th century. They are bound, for the moment, in the shared challenge and opportunity to make things right. The area hangs together on how well the community can solve the puzzle of segregation and white flight, the loss of the black middle class, urban renewal and public housing, gentrification and racial reconciliation.

Race always has been on the surface in Church Hill. Union Hill, a pocket of a neighborhood laid out in 1805 just northwest of the St. John's historic district, has a history as both an economically and racially mixed neighborhood. In 1906, when Richmond annexed a trolley suburb just north of Union Hill, its population was "all white except one negro family," according to the Fairmount Neighborhood application to the National Historic District. Many deeds carried a covenant barring owners from selling to "persons of African descent." At the same time, the adjacent neighborhood of Woodville was marketed in the 1910s as the "colored man's paradise" where "many colored families now own their own houses."

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Scott Elmquist

Mary Thompson, president of the New Visions Civic League, has lived in Church Hill for 60 years. She loves her neighborhood, she says, and "I just want everyone else to love it too."

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The area has been one of the cradles of black Richmond for generations. L. Douglas Wilder, America's first elected black governor, was born and reared in Church Hill North. The small frame church at 812 N. 25th St. has been a black church since before the Civil War. Church Hill's Ray Dandridge is the only Richmonder in the Baseball Hall of Fame. Armstrong High School is one of Richmond's two historically black high schools, with a lineage going back to a Freedman's Bureau school founded in 1865.

With the growth of Richmond to the west and north during the 1910s and 1920s, the city shifted its focus from Church Hill, historic and otherwise. The newer trolley and auto suburbs on Richmond's North Side attracted the new residents and energy of the city. By the 1930s, many of the larger houses in Church Hill North had been cut into apartments. Twenty years later, the deterioration was such that author and preservationist Mary Wingfield Scott described Church Hill around St. John's as "sunk to near slum condition."

The 1950s were a crucial decade for the entire plateau. White flight to the next round of suburbs in Chesterfield and Henrico turned the racial makeup of entire neighborhoods. In 1950, the Oakwood-Chimborazo area was 75 percent white; by 1960, it was 96 percent black. At the same time, the percentage of owner-occupied housing in that area increased. In just 10 years, greater Church Hill became an almost entirely black community — middle-class neighborhoods marked by pockets of poverty.

The foundation for today's historic Church Hill was set in motion in 1956 when the Historic Richmond Foundation began restoring a core district adjacent to St. John's Church. Within a decade, all the houses on the pilot block of Grace between 23rd and 24th streets were completed. It set in motion a restoration-and-renovation movement. Today the area definitely isn't in "slum condition." More than a handful of houses are valued at more than \$500,000.

A tight sense of community exists here that goes back to the families that dug in to save the neighborhood.

"It's the people, that's why we live here," says John Whitworth, who, with his wife, Benedict, has lived on Grace Street for 10 years. From the bright, second-story sunroom overlooking a planted and brick backyard, the secretary of the Church Hill Association is quickly enthusiastic in describing what is appealing about Church Hill.

His list starts off with some of the big neighborhood events — the Holiday House Tour, the Irish Festival, Hogtober (an event co-produced with Style Weekly) — and moves to the details: how nice Diana at ERA Vintage was on his last visit, the Church Hill dog park, the experience of playing host to the Plein Air Richmond painters in June.

In recent years, a younger population has moved to Union and Church Hill North. This mixed group — not all college students — plays well with diversity and is attracted by the opportunities in the area.

Alexandra Franck recently moved to Church Hill from Boulevard for many of the same reasons anyone in their 20s might move. "It's cheap and a lot of space and close to work," she says. She was "a little bit" concerned about the neighborhood before she moved onto Marshall Street. What she found, she says, was community.

"I literally never experienced anything like this," Franck says from behind the counter at WPA Bakery. "Everyone here is involved a little bit in each other's lives. I feel like people want to support local stuff up here and make a conscious effort to do that."

The area's dining renaissance began quietly in 2009 when Alamo BBQ opened up in a small stucco building on Jefferson Avenue in Union Hill. Quickly a neighborhood favorite, the smoked pork and brisket soon brought folks in from the counties and, along with them, national attention. The spotlight grew brighter when the Roosevelt opened in the summer of 2011, followed the next year by Proper Pie, Sub Rosa, WPA Bakery — the troika of the tongue-in-cheek Church Hill bakery district. Sarafran's Soulfood and the lauded Dutch and Co. followed in 2013.

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Scott Elmquist

Bob Buffington opened Captain Buzzy's Beanery in June 2003, when businesses were still reluctant to invest in Church Hill. He wants to keep the coffee shop open one hour later and serve wine and beer, a move that some residents worry will erode the residential feel of the neighborhood.

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The depth of appreciation for such investment in the neighborhood — economic and social — was on full display after Sub Rosa was destroyed by fire. The community rallied, and an online fundraiser pulled in \$16,000 for Evrim and Evin Dogu, the brother-and-sister owners of the bakery, and for the four tenants of the apartments above and beside the bakery. A chef's potluck benefit supper at the Roosevelt a few days later brought out more than 200 neighbors and raised more than \$4,000. Sub Rosa hopes to reopen in October.

The population of the East End is shifting again. The 2010 Census shows a 15 percent drop in the black population in the area, equal to a loss of almost 3,000 residents in 10 years. In census tract 208 — just east of St. John's and bound by 27th and 29th streets, Williamsburg Road, Leigh Street, and the train tracks — the black population has dropped from 1,083 to 467, while the white population has risen from 583 to 880. In tract 205, which includes Union Hill, St. John's, and the condos and apartments at Tobacco Row, the population has increased by 50 percent. The area is now 30 percent black and 53 percent white.

Economic change has come as well: The median household income has almost doubled in those same census tracts since 2000.

The sense of being on the cusp of profound change hangs in the air. In this atmosphere, in which the smallest decisions about the neighborhood's evolution carry added weight, the Church Hill Association membership voted in May to oppose the condominium project known as the Bend on the James. According to minutes of the neighborhood's zoning committee meeting, the units would be priced from the mid-\$400,000s to \$1.3 million, and would range in size from 1,600 to 3,300 square feet.



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Tania Bolden, in the foreground, with Tavish Nichols and Sallie Bailey, sing a gospel song during the East End Fellowship service at the Robinson Theater.

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The decision to vote no was preceded by greater-than-usual division in the ranks of the association. The board was put in the hot seat when an association member proposed that it “allocate \$5,000 for legal and other expenses, to be paid out at the discretion of the board” as part of a plan to oppose the project. At least two of the board members were concerned this would open the board itself to legal action. This dispute, in part, led to their resignations, the former board members say. The remaining board voted to approve the “public awareness and educational fund” in August.

As for Captain Buzzy's, the fault lines opened when owner Buffington sought approval from the City Council for changes to his special-use permit. He was required to obtain one when he opened in 2004 because neighbors then worried about the impact of numerous corner stores and potential traffic. They used zoning regulations to limit the hours and type of businesses that could open in the historic storefront.

What might have been a simple up or down vote by the neighborhood association on whether to support the permit became bogged down and contentious. While the association initially voted to support the limited amendment to the permit, Buffington's first official application to the city expanded the scope of what he was seeking, and it included turning the coffee shop into a full-service restaurant.

Nothing nefarious was going on, Buffington says. “The Planning Commission doesn't like it when businesses come back for extra bites at the apple,” he says. “I take some blame for this. This was my first rodeo in zoning.”

It also appeared that Buffington was putting the business up for sale. He had at one time tried to sell the property, and it remained an active listing on a real estate site after he took it off the market.

A former board member, who asked not be identified, says discerning the truth of the situation was exhausting.

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The nearly 80-year-old Robinson Theater was vacant for more than 20 years before being restored in 2009.

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"I spent an entire work week on defending Captain Buzzy's, 15 hours a day," the former board member says. "I'm personally not a fan of Captain Buzzy's, but ... I believe in the right of people to do what they want to with their properties. I want to see all business succeed."

Another former board member says representing an organization when you "do not agree with the extreme actions of the members," became very uncomfortable.

A current member responds by saying he remains active to try to shape the conversation going forward. "Few others are willing to offer a pro-density, pro-bike, pro-bus, and frankly pro-growth perspective," he says, adding that he will "continue to advocate for my beliefs about neighborhood improvement."

Last week, the association membership voted 45-23 against supporting the amended special-use permit for Captain Buzzy's. City Council was scheduled to hear Buffington's request on the permit this week.

A few folks have tried to address head-on the larger question with which the neighborhood is grappling: How do you redevelop and restore a neighborhood without displacing people?

There's no single answer. But one might be found in the resurrection of the old Robinson Theater.

The theater, built in 1936, was the first black theater in the area. By the mid-2000s it had been vacant for more than 20 years and was ripe for demolition. The property was reborn in 2009 after an amazing renovation, including a new signature marquee, as the Robinson Theater Community Arts Center.

It "was initially about the building," the center's executive director, Betsy Hart, says. The developers didn't come in with a specific plan but were "honestly trusting God to know what to do with it." After talking to neighbors and hearing about the building's history, the developers decided to turn it into a community center. Hart says what it's become "is bigger than dreams."

The Robinson quickly has become a heart and hub of Church Hill North. The big room on Q Street comes alive every day with volunteer-taught zumba, tae kwon do, yoga and dance classes. Movie nights, seasonal block parties and the Showtime at the Robinson talent show draw hundreds of newer and older neighbors.

Hart excitedly pulls up a video on her phone of one of the recent performers doing a fly Michael Jackson routine. The dancer, a smart and endearingly geeky seventh-grader at Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School, is a regular at the Robinson's tae kwon do classes.

“It’s my favorite event that we do,” Hart says about being able to offer the opportunity to serve children “who wouldn’t have otherwise had a stage to show their talent.”

Stop by the Robinson on a Sunday afternoon and you’ll find East End Fellowship in full swing. An intentionally diverse community headed up by co-pastors Don Coleman and Cory Widmer, it’s a direct challenge to the area’s historical racial and economic divides.

The goal is a community that would flourish for everyone, Widmer says — “gentrification with justice,” as he puts it. Most of the church membership is from the neighborhood, and East End Fellowship has attracted new diverse neighbors eager for the sense of place it offers. The two pastors live in the neighborhood, and church members are active in the community on such projects as bringing a school-wide International Baccalaureate to Chimborazo Elementary, as well as Church Hill Activities and Tutoring.

Widmer says he ended up in Church Hill because of Coleman, whom he first thought of as “a crazy minister with a vision of renewal.” Coleman heard Widmer was looking for a place to move his church. “Join me,” he told Widmer.

Widmer is sensitive to the sometimes-uneven impact of change in the community. He recounts the story of a black resident pitching the Chimborazo-area block — and the house next door — to a young, white couple searching for a new home.



Scott Elmquist

Members of the East End Fellowship, Jeremiah Hurst and Alexander Boston, age 1, play before the service inside the renovated Robinson Theater on Q Street in Church Hill.

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“I’ve been praying for a young family to buy that house,” he told the couple. They bought the house. Later, their new neighbor confessed: “I’ve got to level with you, I’m glad you moved in, but our rent has gone up \$75 a month.”

Mike Hogan with RE/MAX Commonwealth says the rental market in Church Hill has undergone a significant transformation. “We’ve seen warehouses and churches converted to rental units, single-family homes renovated, apartments rehabilitated. ... But along with rising inventories, we’ve seen rising rental rates ... because of the incredibly high demand to live in Church Hill.” Median rent in the area adjacent to and north of Chimborazo Park, the area with the most dramatic demographic flip, has risen from \$521 in 2000 to \$1,142, according to an online survey based on 2006–2010 data.

At the heart of the experience for Widmer are the people around him. “I love that people are rediscovering long-forgotten urban communities,” he says. “We have a lot of things to learn. There are beautiful things deeply embedded in neighborhoods like this that most Americans have forgotten.”

Mary White Thompson, president of New Visions Civic League, was born on 29th Street and lived on its 1300 block until she was 15 when she moved to 22nd Street. She’s lived in the same house in Church Hill since 1952, first as a teenager and now as a grande dame of Fairmount with her husband, George. From her vantage point at 22nd and short Q streets, she’s seen and been a part of greater Church Hill’s history.

Thompson’s family was part of the wave of African-Americans who moved into the Fairmount neighborhood when white residents fled in the early 1950s. By the 1990s, after years as a middle- and working-class black neighborhood, Fairmount

had fallen. The children of the first wave of families didn't want to stay in the neighborhood, and it became ragged as the turn-of-the-century frame houses aged and deteriorated. Blocks went from majority black to majority vacant. Almost the entire eastern side of the 1200 block of 22nd Street was boarded up.

Thompson credits the Better Housing Coalition and neighborhood activism with sparking a turnaround. The coalition "came into the community in 1991," she says. "We started New Visions Civic League in 1993. We asked ourselves what we wanted our community to become. It was 85 percent blight."

Two decades later, Thompson is proud of their work. For all the fractiousness that change often brings and despite the very real challenges not only of gentrification, but also of lingering and entrenched poverty, schools still in desperate need of leadership and community buy-in, she is optimistic.

"I feel we are on the right track," she says. "Since 1999, over 100 homes have been built or rehabilitated in our area. We are moving up and seeing a mixture of races in the community. That's a good thing."

Not without challenge, Church Hill is moving up.

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