

\$2.00

Wheelchair Accessible Tour

# SHOCKOE SLIP:

From Top  
To Bottom



**A Short Roll on City Streets  
through Money, Power,  
History & Architecture**



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## Before You Start...

The tour takes about an hour. It is roughly a mile one way... but then you have to get back. The route has curb cuts, food and restroom stops. *Remember, it is all downhill one way, so it's all uphill on the way back, unless you've arranged special parking or pick up.*

### Thoughts on Parking:

*Handicapped Parking is available at the end by special arrangement* and at the beginning by using a commercial parking lot or, if you're lucky, by finding a parking spot along Canal St.

There are two handicapped parking spaces near 15th and Dock Street. They are in the lot for La Difference, an international furnishings store located on the corner of Dock and 14th Street. These are intended for customers, but the owner will make them available for disabled visitors to the canal if they have handicapped user plates or tags. **Call 648-6210.** You must get permission to park, of course. Unauthorized vehicles are, understandably, subject to towing.



## Kanawha Plaza:

You start your tour at the little park at the north end of the Manchester Bridge: Kanawha Plaza. It is bounded by 9<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Streets and between Byrd and Canal Streets. This is the longest stop and has the most reading. Position yourself at 8<sup>th</sup> and Canal St.

Your chair is resting on what was pretty much the end of the Kanawha Canal. In the early 1800's it was one of the fastest travel ways in the nation. It was the route that opened up the Great Valley of Virginia— "The Wheat Basket of the Nation" —the dream of George Washington ... and the namesake for this little park. The Turning Basin, where the canal boats changed direction after they unloaded agricultural products and replaced them with manufactured goods and machinery, was located just across 9<sup>th</sup> St. to the East.

***Looking South*** (towards the river) the huge stainless steel and glass building you see is the Federal Reserve Bank. If you see a resemblance to the World Trade Center in New York City, it is because both were designed by the same architect, Minoru Yamasaki. Completed in 1978, there is as much of this structure underground as above and there is a small army inside to defend all the money. Note all the rocks and iron fencing along the road to deter truck bombs.



This is also the former site of the Richmond & Petersburg railroad yard. Nothing remains now, but if you turn all the way around to the right, and look at the corner of



7<sup>th</sup> and Canal St., you can see the massive concrete entrance to their former train repair facility. (It is now the entrance to an underground parking deck. It has a big iron gate in front and the building on top has vertical, black windows.)



**Immediately to the right** is the main administrative building for Dominion Resources, one of the nation's largest producers of electricity. We've now covered transportation, money and power.

**Slightly more to the right**, 2 blocks up 9<sup>th</sup> St. and just out of sight, is the State Capitol. It was designed by Thomas Jefferson to be the architectural focus of the city, but alas its grandeur has been eclipsed by short-sighted development. (So much for politics.)

**Still more to the right** is the glimmering glass siding of the James Center - home to an important law firm (McGuire Woods) and the CSX Railroad. Note also the bank names on this and other buildings further down Canal St. ---BB&T, Sun-Trust, and Wachovia. Before the Civil War, Richmond was the banking and insurance center of the South based on its financing of tobacco, manufacturing, transportation and the slave trade. It is still an important regional center, but for somewhat different reasons.

And finally, **completing the circle** you've just made, are the two brown towers of Riverfront Plaza: this has a mix of business offices ... and a private restaurant ( The Bull and Bear) with one of the finest views of the river. Some day there may be a public restaurant that allows the beauty of the river to be shared by local citizens and visiting tourists.



## IT'S TIME TO GET ROLLING

- *Take the crosswalks over to the S/E corner of 9<sup>th</sup> & E. Cary Street.*
- *Beware high-speed traffic. This is your only big street crossing.*



## CARY St. at the JAMES CENTER

Observe the statue of “The Boatman” – a fanciful but powerful work of art. Canal boats and river bateaux had no sails, but black men did predominate on such boats. Perhaps this is a small ferry or local freighter for downstream river travel. It is certainly a reference to the hard work of a boatman.

*Go down Cary Street to the...*

## OMNI HOTEL

The line of stones here marks the footprint of a lock on the Kanawha Canal made with blocks of granite from the original canal. (There is a historical interpretive sign, but if you are in a chair you’ll need someone to read it to you since it’s placed a bit high). This is a nice place for a short rest and a great place for kids to scamper around if you’ve brought any along. Note also the stonecutters’ trim marks on the stones and the holes for lifting.



In December, this is also the focal point for the Christmas Lights of Richmond Celebration. You can see the strings of lights that now permanently run up the sides of the buildings.



*Continue down the sidewalk to the corner of...*

## **CARY St. and 12th St.**

*This is the beginning of the historic-looking district.*



The Tobacco Company Restaurant building is a restored, 19th century tobacco warehouse.

**Check out the cobblestone roadway** with its attractive surface pattern. A dirt road on this hill would have turned into a maze of impassable ruts after a few rains.

The stones are made of granite and that is what is found at the deep roots of volcanoes, or, here at the Fall Line, as the stony scar of the collision between Africa and North America 250 million years ago. It is a hard rock, but it can be shaped nicely and it wears well. The most money was made selling big blocks for constructing buildings or slabs for laying out side-



walks (you'll see these ahead), but there was also a lower-profit market in the labor-intensive smaller stuff like cobblestones. These were hand cut at 1 cent apiece by Italian immigrants –the best stonemasons–often from scrap rock in the quarries that line the river for 7 miles upstream. Irish immigrants and black slave labor laid the cobblestone roads and curbstones. These particular cobblestones were cleaned and reset by volunteers in the early 1980's – a part of the vision of a historic City by Assistant City Manager Howe Todd.

*Continue ...*

## **1/2 block further down CARY St.**

On either side of the street are old 19th century storefronts reminiscent of Georgetown in Washington, DC. Alas, many are not yet accessible, since it is complicated to retrofit old, historic structures and maintain their integrity, but there is an effort.

If you touch one of the green, fluted pillars here you can see that the fronts of these buildings are all made of heavy cast iron – an architectural design related to the new technology of the time- late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Richmond once had 17 or more iron foundries. They made products that varied from steam engines to ornamental fencing, armor plates to wire and nails. Scrap iron was shipped in from England as ballast in sailing ships. Raw pig iron was shipped down from western parts of the state by canal, and the energy for processing came from coal and waterpower nearby. Scots-Irish immigrants (and, for the first 1/2 of the century, rented black slaves) provided the labor. Iron was stronger than wood, cheaper than stone, and very popular in the mid to late 1800's, but lost out to concrete in the 1900's.

*Keep going ...*

## **to the corner of CARY St. & SHOCKOE SLIP**

*Look to the right* and into the alcove. In the center is an old horse trough that functions now as a decorative fountain. Just beyond is the modern brick architecture



of a famous advertising company – The Martin Agency. To the right, there is a great little coffee shop, which, alas, has no handicapped access yet. As a consolation, you can get a sense of everyday carriage travel in the 19<sup>th</sup> century if you bounce across the cobblestones to inspect the fountain.

*Go back out to the intersection of...*

## **CARY St. and SHOCKOE SLIP**

*...and look across at the other side.*

Now carefully cross the road to the opposite corner (the intersecting street there changes names to become 13<sup>th</sup> St.) and examine the rare, old-fashioned stone slab sidewalk that begins on the corner. There is a rough ramp, but you don't need to go up, since you can easily see everything from the street level.

The sidewalk is made of huge, heavy chunks of granite, 3 x 8 x 1 feet, with chiseled grooves on top to provide safe footing and drainage. The enormous weight and size give a good idea why sidewalks were not placed everywhere in 19<sup>th</sup> century cities, and why concrete changed what cities looked like in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

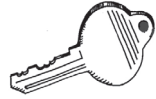
**Go back to the sidewalk on the...**

## **SOUTH SIDE of CARY St.**

The curb cut here is better than on the other side, but on either side the walkway is bumpy. You may wish you had springs and shock absorbers at this point. You'll pass over a mix of iron gates, tree wells and uneven paving blocks. The grates allow an unexpected birds-eye-view down into the basement offices below you.



***If you are hungry*** or need to use the rest room, cross over Virginia Street to Sine` Restaurant. Wheelchair access is the first door near the corner --- it's just past the black cast iron cannon barrel sticking out of the ground. (Unfortunately, it is not always unlocked, so you may need to rap on the main door, 30 feet beyond, to get someone to open it.)



*To continue the tour...*

## **turn right on VIRGINIA St.**

Follow straight ahead, cross over Canal St. and stop underneath the Expressway that rumbles overhead.

***Portable toilets*** are located straight ahead on the right. (That is just after you have crossed over the canal.) One unit is wheelchair accessible.

The ***Canal Walk*** is located to your left. Follow the path to its junction with 14th St. The ramp down to the canal is immediately on your right.

*Roll to the bottom of the ramp ...* and turn to face the water.

## **CANAL WALK OVERVIEW**

***The modern canal ahead of you*** is actually a modification of the Great Shiplock Canal that goes out to the river 3/4 of a mile to your left (i.e. the east). Remember that the famous Kanawha Canal came to a halt back on top of the hill, about where we began the tour. A series of canal locks was later constructed to connect the two and allow for the transfer of supplies down to the ocean-going ships waiting at wharves along Dock St., also to your left.

**Note the modern stonework** here. Compare it to the granite up at the Omni Hotel or in the streets of Shockoe. Though the surface textures look different, there is a continuum of craftsmanship. The workers are the same—itinerant Italian stonemasons. In this case, the workers came from one village in Italy, since few Americans have these skills today.

The Canal here is shallow, has little current, and few fish. It flows slowly to the east, however, and becomes progressively deeper and fish-filled as it passes the old tobacco warehouses (now upscale apartments) and former dock sites on its way to what is now Great Shiplock Park. The canal boat tour goes up to there.



**Look to your right.** (west) The canal appears to end in 2 blocks; it actually connects via a pipe to the next waterway, the Haxall Canal, which is located at a higher level. That canal is the body of water which creates Brown's Island (site of many festivals and public events) and along which the upper Canal Walk resides.

**Look up onto the horizon** to the west. The large, new building is a restaurant/apartment complex intended to attract more visitors to the upper Canal. (You may have noticed that the canal walk here has been pleasantly uncrowded so far.) The building is a renovation of an old steam/hydroelectric power plant. It once got its power from the water in the upper canal. The new development will get its energy from the wallets of the people walking or rolling alongside the water.



Regrettably, the connection from here to the upper canal is not wheelchair friendly. There are several flights of narrow, twisting, historic stone stairs, so unless you have brought 4 Sherpas, some ropes and a pulley, you must ponder the following:



*Either–*

**Take a canal boat trip** ... you start at the bottom of the ramp.

It costs 4 or 5 dollars, lasts about 45 minutes and includes a 20-minute interpretive talk. (They are set up for wheelchair access.) It's a nice way to see a lot – the old dock area, the old tobacco warehouses and a counter-weighted, mechanical, “Bascule” railroad draw bridge. And you also get to wave at everybody else who has to walk! When you dock, you'll be back here, at the Turning Basin. This is the end of the short tour.

Hopefully, you have parked a car down here. If your car is back at the 9<sup>th</sup> St. area (6 or 7 blocks away) it's a long, hard, roll back up the hill unless you've got a good power chair.

*Or–*

*If you'd like to continue...*

**Take the Canal Walk** ... That's the path going westward along the canal.

The Custom House is the brick building with the stone wall built into the base. Freight goods from Europe were checked and stored here before trans-shipment on the Kanawha Canal to the interior of the state, especially the Great Valley region.

**At the end of the walkway** you will come to an overhang under which the canal ends. It is sort of a grotto; a nice escape from the heat in summer and a good place to picnic. There are some display signs, and remnants of the original canal on the right side, and a bridge to take you to the other side of the canal where there is a smaller grotto and a more private place to picnic.



**Cross the bridge and take the walkway on the other side** (eastward) back to the 14<sup>th</sup> St. Bridge, go under it, and follow the path to the end. (You will pass by the footbridge that goes over the canal.) The path curves to the right, goes uphill and changes to asphalt. Go as far as the railroad tracks and stop.

**Look straight ahead.** You are gazing at the Richmond Floodwall. Built by the US Army Corps of Engineers in the mid 1980's, the structure is about 36 feet high and intended to keep the James River out of Shockoe Slip when it floods above the 25 foot point – generally, lesser floods won't bother this area ... the "normal" level is about 5 1/2 feet. Note the 3 tiered ("bunk-bed style") of bracing. This stiffens the wall where a storm-water drain passes underneath.



**Look to the right.** Hanging on the floodwall is a series of huge, faded posters about Richmond's history. They have all the charm of highway billboards now. How interesting it would be, if instead, they were designed as windows through time—imagine views of the river at different points in its history. But this is still a dream.

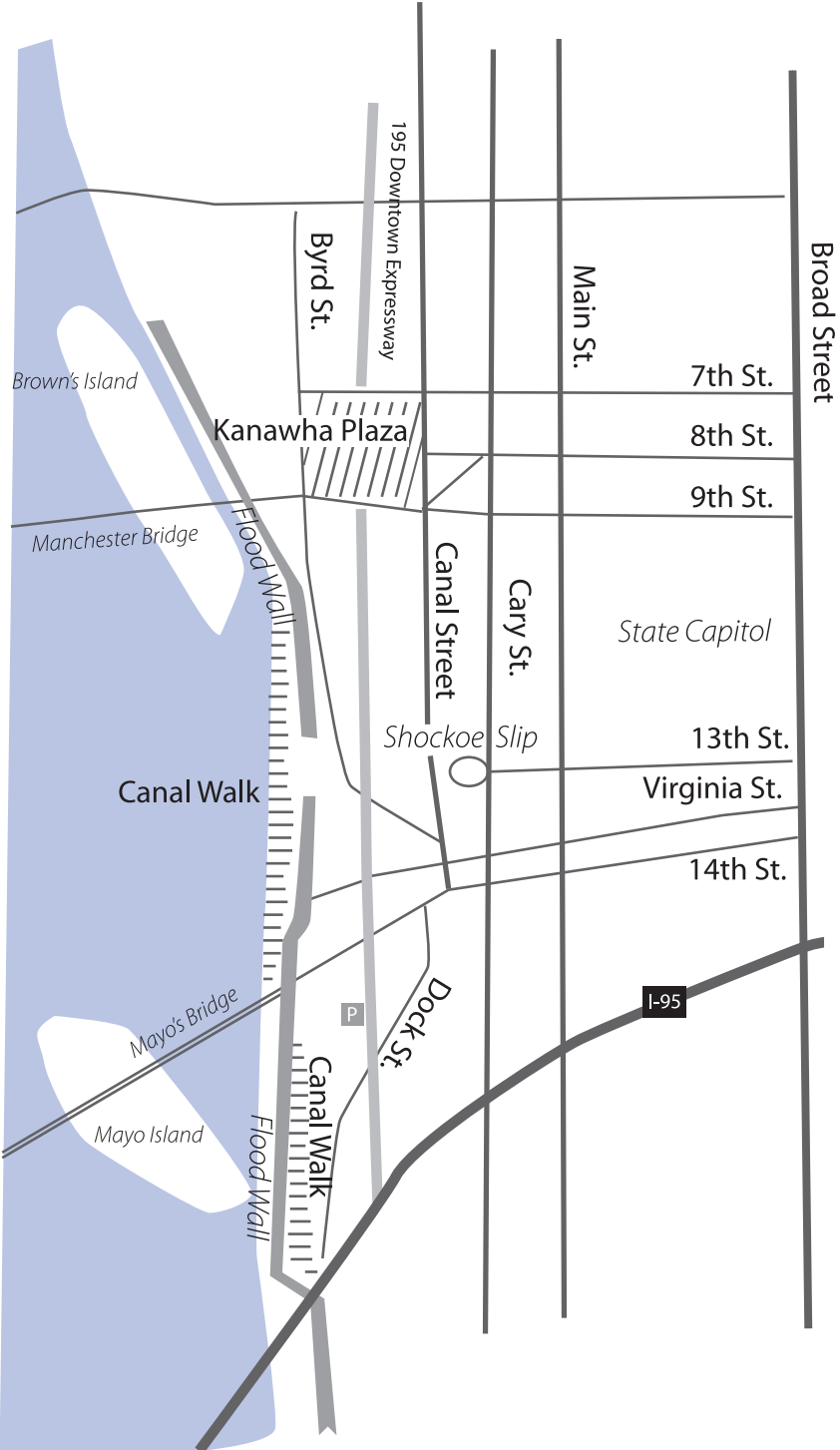
At the end, near 14<sup>th</sup> St., there is a full-sized bas-relief of a canal boat. Seeing this up close is an interesting way to get a sense the size of the craft, but you have to come back here to finish the tour.

**Look down the tracks to your left.** Now look up.

You are observing the only 3 level railroad crossing in the country. The lowest level track is lightly used by Norfolk-Southern Railroad and goes east to the paper mill at West Point on the Rappahannock River. The second level is a shared passenger and freight track used by AMTRAK and others, that goes north/south and on which commuter travel is expected to grow. The upper level is a very heavily used track owned by CSX Railroad used to carry coal from the western sections of Virginia to the biggest coal depot on the east coast – Hampton Roads – located at the mouth of the James River. The opening in the floodwall has a swinging door. It is kept open so trains can go through, but obviously closes when there is a flood. There is another one (not visible) on the canal behind you.



**Go back to the bridge.** It leads over to Dock Street and the end of the tour.



We hope you have enjoyed your visit and would appreciate your comments and observations about this tour. Please don't hesitate to contact us if you have had any problems or if you have suggestions for changes. You may send us your comments via:

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## **OTHER PUBLICATIONS**

Seeing the Scars of Slavery  
in the Natural Environment

An Interpretive Guide to the Richmond Floodwall

An Interpretive Guide To Belle Isle  
( From Indians to Industry )

An Interpretive Guide to the Trails of the  
Pony Pasture Rapids

Geology Along the Fall Line

Snorkeling in the City

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Inner Tube Trips on the River in the City

Photographer's Guide to the River in Richmond

An Underwater Guide to the River