Downtown Walking Tour

Nestled in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, Charlottesville lies in the heart of ancestral Monacan Indian territory, near where the town of Monasukapanough had been settled for centuries. Founded in 1762 as the new county seat for Albemarle County, Charlottesville is named in honor of Queen Charlotte of Great Britain.

Known best for Thomas Jefferson and the University of Virginia, the City has a deep and complicated history rooted in a slave economy. Today, Charlottesville struggles to undo generations of racial and social injustice.

Explore Downtown, Court Square, Market St Park, and vestiges of Vinegar Hill for a glimpse into Charlottesville’s journey.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Downtown Mall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Mesker Brothers Iron Works in façade, 1885</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Art Deco façade, 1931</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. The Paramount, 1931, 215 E Main St</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Site of Bem-Hemings-Scott residence, 1790</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. The National Bank of Charlottesville, 1920, 12 1/2 E Main St</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Central Place Fountain, former horse trough, 1804, 170 E Main St and 2nd St</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Transportation transformation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Charlottesville Hardware Co, 1909, 315 E Main St</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Gilmore Furniture, 1909</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Timberlake Drug Store, 1917</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Charlottesville Hardware Co, 1909, 315 E Main St</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Victorian Italianate buildings, 1890</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Streamline Moderne lower façade, 1940</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Three Notch’d Road, 1730</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Horse and trolley barn, 1887</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. City Hall, 1969, 605 E Main St</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Theaters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Transportation transformation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Theaters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. Old Preston Ave</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Transportation transformation

Charlottesville was established along 18th century transportation routes. Main St follows a trail adopted by colonial settlers in the 1730s called Three Notch’d Road [15]. Horse and river navigation were the only options for long-distance travel until train service arrived in 1850. From 1887 to 1935, streetcar [16] connected Main St to the south and west, first horse-drawn and later electric. After WWII, the automobile enabled travelers and residents to move to the suburbs. Responding to a decline of the downtown area, City Council made a bold decision in 1972 to transform several blocks of Main St into a pedestrian mall.

The Downtown Mall

Inspired by the area’s mountain streams and forests, landscape architect Lawrence Halprin & Associates designed the Mall with strategically placed willow oaks and large and small planters to encourage pedestrians to meander down the Mall. Mall sought to evoke Main St’s past by using the historic materials of brick, granite, and cast iron. Outdoor seating and fountain service. The interior reflects its origins as People’s Drugstore, Drugs and Seeds [2]. During Prohibition, Guy Miller was allowed to sell whiskey. “for medicinal use only.” Now a restaurant, it is here that bartender Dave Matthews met jazz musicians LeRoi Moore and Carter Beauford, and formed the Dave Matthews Band. Timberlake [12] another of 12 drugstores on Main St in 1917 still offers old-fashioned fountain service. The interior reflects its origins as People’s National Bank. Note the architectural contract to Gilmore Furniture [11] next door, with a distinctive copper façade, and Charlottesville Hardware [10] that operated here for almost 100 years.

Early businesses

Above some businesses are vintage signs such as Miller Drugs, Drugs and Seeds [2]. During Prohibition, Guy Miller was allowed to sell whiskey. “for medicinal use only.” Now a restaurant, it is here that bartender Dave Matthews met jazz musicians LeRoi Moore and Carter Beauford, and formed the Dave Matthews Band. Timberlake [12] another of 12 drugstores on Main St in 1917 still offers old-fashioned fountain service. The interior reflects its origins as People’s National Bank. Note the architectural contract to Gilmore Furniture [11] next door, with a distinctive copper façade, and Charlottesville Hardware [10] that operated here for almost 100 years.

Theater

Built as a bank in 1902, Jefferson Theater [4] opened in 1912 as a segregated theater for live performances, silent movies, and vaudeville. The Paramount [7], designed by Rapp & Rapp, opened in 1931 in the golden age of cinema. A separate entrance, preserved on Third St, led to segregated balcony seating for Black patrons. A lighted marquee and blade sign drew moviegoers into a grand space with painted tapestries, elegant moldings, and chandeliers. The theater closed in 1974 and was restored in the 1990s. Today, both theaters host live shows.

A variety of architectural styles


To enhance your tour—
- Read the narratives first
- Look for historic markers

To learn more visit—
- Albemarle Charlottesville Historical Society
- Charlottesville Walking Tour
- Charlottesville Visitors Center
- University of Virginia’s Albemarle County History
- Jefferson School African American Heritage Center
- American Heritage Center
- Monticello
- University of Virginia

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Design & Maps: Anne Chesnut
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History of the Monacan Nation
Monacan Indians and their fellow Souah-speaking neighbors lived throughout the Piedmont and Blue Ridge Mountain region of Virginia. Their communities included large towns, sacred burial mounds, and many smaller settlements along the major rivers. Monacanophobia, a large Monacan town located four miles north of downtown Charlottesville on the Rivanna River, was settled into the early 18th century. The Monacans discouraged colonial interaction because, as one Monacan named Amosrock prophetically said in 1608, the colonists were “a people come from under the world, to take their world from them.” The Monacans chose to move away from colonial expansion to other areas, including Bear Mountain in Amherst County. Today, the heart of the federally recognized Monacan Indian Nation.

European settlers claim Monacan land
By the mid-18th century, English colonists had claimed the fields and towns of the Monacans and created farms and plantations, exploiting enslaved Black workers to grow tobacco and other cash crops. Spurred by population growth, the Virginia House of Burgesses chartered a new town in 1762, naming it Charlottesville for Queen Charlotte of Great Britain. From its inception until the mid-19th century, Court Square was the social and civic center of the town and Albemarle County.

Legend
- Historic marker or interpretive sign
- Historic location only
- Parking
- Downtown Mall
- Water Street
- Court Square
- Market Street
- Vinegar Hill

Vinegar Hill
Vinegar Hill was named by Irish immigrants and exiles living here in the early 1800s. It later grew to be the largest of eight predominately Black neighborhoods, a vibrant community of tobacco and other cash crops. Spurred by population growth, the Virginia House of Burgesses chartered a new town in 1762, naming it Charlottesville for Queen Charlotte of Great Britain. From its inception until the mid-19th century, Court Square was the social and civic center of the town and Albemarle County.

Racially segregated schools
In 1850, the Freedmen’s Bureau opened a school for formerly enslaved children and adults on West Main St and named it Jefferson School. It was short-lived, closed in 1857. In 1870, Virginia established free public education, segregated by race. Midway School opened in 1893 for White students, grades 1–12. In 1926, the school Board built Jefferson Graded School near Vinegar Hill to serve Black children, grades 1-8. High school was unavailable to Black students until 1926 when parent and community leaders petitioned the city to build Jefferson High School. In 1951, Jefferson High students moved to Jackson P. Burley, a new City-County Black high school, and Jefferson High became a Black elementary school.

Desegregation
After the 1954 US Supreme Court ruled in Brown v. Board of Education that segregation in public schools was unconstitutional, the Charlottesville School Board refused to desegregate. Black parents, supported by the NAACP, sued. When the federal court ordered the admission of 12 Black students to Lane High and Venable Elementary in 1959, Gov. Lindsay Almond closed the two schools for six months under a state policy of massive resistance. After the school desegregation plan was delayed, and by 1960, all city schools were desegregated.

Schools re-purposed
Jefferson School’s demolition in 2017 is now home to the Jefferson School African American Heritage Center, a community space offering history, art, and theater. McGuire High School, one of the first arts cooperatives in the nation has public galleries. Both are on the National Register of Historic Places and open to the public.

To enhance your tour—
- Read the narratives first
- To learn more visit—
  - www.virginia.edu
  - University of Virginia
  - Monticello
  - albemarlehistory.org
  - charlottesville.gov/walkingtourmap
  - histcharlottesville.com

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Market Street Park
Paul Goodloe McIntire purchased the land for this park in 1917 and donated funds to build a Colonial-style public library adjacent to the park for White patrons. Today the former library houses the Albemarle Charlottesville Historical Society. Designed by Walter Daniel Blais, it features Palladian-style windows and a marble entrance. McIntire commissioned a statue of Gen. Robert E. Lee for the new park that was dedicated in 1924 as part of a Confederate reunion [31]. City Council’s 2017 decision to remove the Lee statue was met by white supremacists’ violent attacks. In 2021, the park was renamed and the statue removed.

Federal building and civil rights
In 1907, the government built a post office and federal court [33] on the site of Congregation Beth Israel. The federal court was the site of pivotal hearings on desegregation. In 1955, NAACP attorney Thurgood Marshall successfully argued that Gregory Swanson be admitted as the first Black law student at UVA. In 1956, Black Tamale, with support of the local NAACP, sued to desegregate City public schools, eventually forcing their integration. The federal building was designed by James Knox Taylor with a 1938 addition by Llewellyn Simon. John Rinkel redesigned the building as a regional Brutny in the 1980s.