

A Self-Guided Tour of Joseph Bryan Park



This self-guided tour identifies some of the notable features of Bryan Park. You are invited to explore the park at your leisure and notice its rich diversity: serene grassy hillsides, meadow and forest areas, trails and wildlife, streams and lakes, trees and azalea gardens, family and recreation areas. Discover Bryan Park's history and abundant recreational and natural resources!

Evolution of Bryan Park: Before becoming a park, this property in the late 1700s was part of the Young Family's 600-acre Westbrook Estate. After William Young's death in 1832, the property was divided between his son and daughter, John (who received the house and the eastern portion) and Rosina (who was given the western portion, most of Bryan Park today). In 1835, Rosina Young married Augustus Mordecai, whose family had lived in Spring Farm, just north of Bryan Park, in the early 1800s. Several years later, they built a farmhouse on their 288 acres and called it Rosewood in her honor. They raised four children.

During the Civil War, this area became Richmond's Outer Defense Line. (See stop #6.) Confederate camps and batteries were situated near Rosewood. Following the war, Rosina (and her daughter) continued to farm Rosewood until her death in 1906. By the turn of the century, development was growing into Richmond's North Side. Prominent Richmond citizens, such as Lewis Ginter and Joseph Bryan, were developing large "suburban" residential communities, served by electric trolley lines. Bryan, publisher of the Richmond Times since the late 1880s (now the Richmond Times-Dispatch) was a lawyer, social progressive, and philanthropist, who had built his "Laburnum Estate" on Brook Road. Less than a year after his death in 1908, his widow, Belle Stewart Bryan of Brook Hill (2 miles farther west of Laburnum on Brook Road), bought Rosewood at a public auction. It was donated to the city as a memorial to Joseph Bryan "as a free park for the use and benefit of all its citizens," to ensure that the wooded hills, streams and lakes would be enjoyed by Richmond citizens in perpetuity. The Richmond City Council spent several years transforming the farm into a park with a formal entrance, a gatekeeper's house, boating, horseback riding and picnic areas. Roadway construction and landscape development took place throughout the first third of the last century; the rustic shelters, bridges, granite curbs and cook-out pits were built during the Depression.



1 Shelter 1 Area: This shelter, built in 1934, is an excellent example of the shelters built in Richmond and in many state parks by the Works Progress Administration, which created jobs for craftspeople and laborers during the Depression. It shows “rustic” design ingenuity: note the fireplaces, shuttered windows, and the cedar trunk columns. Public amenities such as these are historically significant; with recreational facilities nearby, they are invaluable.

② Young's Pond and Princeton Creek: Can you see where sediment is accumulating in this pond? Note that trees have taken root and are reclaiming land. This pond should be dredged; a shallow pond stores less flood water, stays warmer, concentrates pollutants and sustains less diverse aquatic life. The side stream, Princeton Creek, enters Bryan Park from the Bellevue area; until the 1920s, it was known as Willow Creek. In the 1950s, it was "channelized." This reduces erosion but moves storm water faster and often causes flooding; it also eliminates the filtering process which stream-side vegetation accomplishes. Notice how nicely the picnic area and floodwalls are integrated into the rocky hillside. Further upstream, some of the larger granite rocks in the stream bed show signs of quarrying. Look for drill holes and for flat, sheared sides on the rocks.

③ Young's Pond Dam, former Mill Site: In the Fall Line area, you can see where streams have cut through the soft topsoil (deposited by ancient oceans) to the Petersburg granite bedrock. At the Fall Line waterfalls, rock outcroppings offer opportunities for damming and generating waterpower. In the late 1700s, Young's Mill Pond and the gristmill built just south of the dam were well-known in this rural farming area well outside of Richmond. In the early 1800s, adding a saw mill here kept Young's Pond busy. In winter, ice was cut from the pond and covered in sawdust, stored in underground cellars and kept until summer. On the side of the wooded hill toward the main gate, notice the depression where one of these ice houses may have been located.

④ Gabriel's Rebellion: As shown on early maps, the location of Young's spring, probably was between the dam and Lakeside Avenue, just above the north bank of Upham Brook. (Street and drainage improvement in the 20th century have altered it somewhat; look for where the spring was located south of the intersection of Buckingham and Bryan Park Avenues.) A famous slave insurrection known as Gabriel's Rebellion was planned here in 1800. Then, the rocks below the millpond were a popular meeting place; on Sundays, slaves would gather by Young's Spring to sermonize, fry fish, and socialize. In August, Gabriel Prosser, a slave blacksmith from a nearby farm, plotted to organize slaves, servants, and indentured craftsmen to raid the Arsenal in Capitol Square, capture Governor James Monroe, and win their freedom. Planned for August 30th, the attempt was thwarted by abnormally heavy rains, which made crossing Upham Brook impossible. The next day, plans for the uprising were revealed, and the plot was foiled. Gabriel fled, but was captured several weeks later. Twenty-six other conspirators were also discovered. All were hanged.

5 Entrance Gateway and Gatehouse: The stone arch depicted on the cover of this brochure was the original gateway into the park, erected by City Council in 1912 for \$5,000. It was built to memorialize Belle Stewart Bryan and sons, in appreciation of their generous memorial gift of Bryan Park. The Gate Keeper's house was built in 1911, and the stone garage behind it was built by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in 1933. The park entrance was relocated and the present gate was erected by the Turnpike Authority in the late 1950s. Note that the original wrought-iron fencing and large bronze commemoration plaques were incorporated into the new design.

6 Richmond Outer Defense Line: Richmond's Outer Defense Line flanked the north side of the city. These fortifications, built from 1862 to 1864, stretched westward from this area for 4 miles before turning south to meet the James. Gun emplacements and fortifications were located just north of Westbrook Avenue. Large fortifications were placed north and south of Bryan Park's ponds. Confederate troops were stationed near Rosewood throughout the war.

7 Camp House: In the 1920s, when the automobile brought mobility to the public and Florida began to boom, Auto Tourist Camps sprang up throughout the country. The city expanded Bryan Park's amenities for auto tourism and overnight camping. This building was a dormitory for women and included a library and wash room/laundry with hot and cold water. The broad hill to the east is a popular sledding area during snowfalls. It is believed that Rosewood and related outbuildings were once located near the top of this hill.

8 Soccer Complex: For years the city maintained a tree nursery in a former farm field here. The Central Virginia Soccer Association, with local and national support, built these soccer fields and gave them to the city in 1998. The playground to the north was built by Friends of Bryan Park in 1996.

9 Azalea Garden: In 1952, Robert H. Harvey, the city's Department of Recreation and Parks' Superintendent of Grounds and Structures, began the gardens with the donation of 5,000 azaleas from the City of Norfolk. With the help of many volunteers, 45,000 azaleas (50 different varieties) were planted throughout 17 acres. When the azaleas were at their peak, as many as 400,000 people would visit each spring to see their majesty. Notable features include a small pond with a fountain and a large red and white cross composed of azaleas, framed by evergreen boxwoods (started with slips from the Carillon in Byrd Park).

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The Meadow: The large open area to the west of the soccer fields is the city's former Stump Dump. Friends of Bryan Park, with help from the Greater Richmond Environmental Action Committee (a.k.a. GREAT), are restoring this meadow area with an information kiosk, trails, a viewing mound and signs. The area is brimming with wildlife activity. It is mowed once a season, in late winter, to keep it from reverting to forest land.

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Hardwood Forests and Jordan's Branch Trails: This "backside" of the park contains mature hardwoods, varied wildlife and a family of Great Horned Owls. The trail opposite the road T-intersection leads to Jordan's Branch and intersects with other trails. Two dozen different tree species are identified along Jordan's Branch Trail.

Other Opportunities:

Many of the park's roads are pedestrian-only, allowing for jogging, skating, and childfriendly bicycling. Disc golf has come to Bryan Park. Come play on the 18 goal course! Fishing is allowed in the park's two ponds. Please note that water quality may be questionable; we strongly recommend catch and release.

Birds are abundant in the park. Beginning at Shelter #1, the Audubon Society hosts bird walks in Bryan Park on the first Sunday of each month, 30 minutes after sunrise.

Visit the old Shelter #2 area, which is proposed as a Nature Preserve area. Follow the elegant bridge over Jordan's Branch (built in 1934, another WPA project) to where we hope to develop an Environmental Education Center. Wetlands and wildlife can be seen by walking westward along the northern shore of the upper pond. Keep an eye open for the Great Blue Herons – they are very shy.

Joseph Bryan Park was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in October, 2002. To learn more of the park's history, refer to *An Illustrated History of Bryan Park*, published October 2003 by Friends of Bryan Park.

Friends of Bryan Park is a group of city and county residents dedicated to the preservation and improvement of Bryan Park. Would you like to help rehabilitate Bryan Park, care for an azalea bed, give a memorial tree or bench, make a contribution (your donations are welcome and are tax-deductible), or volunteer for some of our special projects and events?

For information you can visit:

www.friendsofbryanpark.org

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