



## A Tale of Two Armories

Richmond was once home to five civic armories, built over a 30 year period from the 1880s to the 1910s during the nation-wide armory construction movement. Armories were among the American building types that signaled their function at a glance, and the castle-like armory found in many American cities conveyed a sense of civic pride, strength and order. Each of Richmond's armories was designed in the castellated style of the classic American civic armory building, characterized by turreted walls and crenelated roof parapets. Three of Richmond's five armories have been demolished and now only two remain: the First Virginia Volunteers Battalion Armory in Jackson Ward and the Richmond Light Infantry Blues Armory in Downtown Richmond. Both have sat vacant for several decades. Recently, the First Virginia Volunteers Battalion Armory was restored and became the Black History Museum and Cultural Center of Virginia, while the status of the Richmond Light Infantry Blues Armory remains uncertain. Historic Richmond's vision for Richmond includes a fully restored Blues Armory serving as a catalyst to spark revitalization in an important Downtown district, just as the Black History Museum recently has sparked revitalization in Jackson Ward, with both structures contributing to the Richmond community for many years to come.

### Local Militias

Local militias were first organized for local defense purposes during the Colonial period and then were formalized in the U.S. Constitution, which provided for Congress to call forth the militia to execute the laws of the union, suppress insurrections and repel invasions. The Constitution further provided for Congress to organize, arm, and discipline the militia, reserving to the States the appointment of the militia officers and the training of the militia according to the discipline prescribed by Congress.

After the Revolutionary War, the United States relied on the regular militia, a form of compulsory military service. During the early nineteenth century, the regular militia declined as interest in compulsory military duty faded. However, interest in voluntary militias increased during the early years of the nineteenth century, offsetting the decline in the regular militias. During the antebellum period, members of volunteer militia companies had certain common characteristics: they were white, male and generally were sufficiently affluent to pay for their

own weapons, uniforms and dues. In some cities, voluntary militia companies were comprised of homogenous groups of tradesmen or immigrants. Other companies were comprised of the well-to-do from long established families. Volunteer militias served actively with distinction in all foreign wars of the nineteenth century, including the War of 1812, the Mexican War of 1846, the Spanish-American War, as well as the Civil War.

Volunteer militias served a social and ceremonial purpose as well, hosting gala events, parading on the Fourth of July and George Washington's birthday, marching in funeral processions, and conveying a sense of grandeur and military might. Besides the pomp and circumstance, the volunteer militias played an important role in suppressing riot and insurrection. Throughout the nation, starting in the 1830s, the militias suppressed various instances of civic unrest and rioting.

In Virginia, during the antebellum period, the militias assisted in the suppression of Gabriel's Rebellion and other insurrections of the enslaved. After the Civil War, the Freedman's Bureau Act and Civil Rights Act of 1866 gave blacks the right to bear arms and form militias. During this period, Virginia had more than 20 companies of black militia formed in two battalions. Members of Virginia's black militias were exemplary citizens, serving with honor when mustered, as well as providing ceremonial service, marching in Emancipation Day and other parades.

### **The National Armory Movement**

At first, in Virginia and elsewhere, volunteer militias met in rented quarters, training and drilling in public spaces. But as the nineteenth century wore on, volunteer militias played a greater role in suppressing civil disobedience, requiring more frequent training and secure storage of arms. They became increasingly important as social clubs, which called for suitable meeting halls for large groups of people. A few regimental armories were constructed beginning in the late 1850s and early 1860s in New York, Brooklyn and Philadelphia, but they did not possess the unique architectural style that would distinguish them as armories. It was not until the mid-1870s that the distinct and romantic military style of architecture would be employed for armory construction nationwide.

To build their new regimental armories, many militia regiments solicited land or funds from cities, states, alumni, wealthy benefactors, residents and businesses. Many followed the model set by New York's Seventh Regiment in 1880 in raising more than \$589,000 to construct its extravagant new armory at Park Avenue and 66<sup>th</sup> Street in New York. Like the Seventh Regiment armory, located in an exclusive New York neighborhood, regimental armories were located within cities in places that often defied military logic, in places that were instead convenient to their fashionable social membership.

While their locations often were not selected for defensive military purposes, the construction of the new regimental armories at the end of the nineteenth century was an example of form following function. As many cities had only a small police force, local militia companies served

an important role in suppressing strikes by organized labor. Handsome military fortresses in the castellated style, late nineteenth century armories contained crenellated towers, thick masonry walls, heavy iron-enforced doors, with narrow windows enfilading all approaches to allow guardsmen to defend against advancing rioters and strikers. Inside the regimental armories were large drill sheds, reception rooms, libraries, secure storage for munitions and other amenities. During this period of the late nineteenth century, many armories were built in this castellated fortress style, often known as military Gothic.

However, by the early twentieth century, the more fanciful style was abandoned in favor of a more restrained classicism. The change in style followed a change in function, for the armories no longer needed to serve a defensive purpose and came to serve as civilian facilities and community centers, as well as the home for the modern National Guard. In the wake of the Spanish-American War, fears of class warfare had been subordinated in the national mind by fears of foreign warfare and of a military unprepared to fight in those foreign wars. The State militias, which had been organized as part of the National Guard, were turned into a backup reserve force for the Army and came to serve as an all-purpose emergency force, fighting fires and providing relief in the event of disasters. The spacious drill sheds of the regimental armories built during this period often served as the largest auditorium or gathering place in a city, suitable for attracting large conventions. As a coliseum or community center, an armory no longer needed to be a fortress, but instead needed to be accessible, allowing a quick means of ingress and egress, as well as many windows to allow light to enter and air to circulate.

Richmond's two remaining regimental armories are memorable examples of the massive urban armories erected nationwide from the 1870s to 1920s, with the Leigh Street Armory unique in the nation as one of the only regimental armories built for a black regiment and the Blues Armory as an example of the evolving form of armories, featuring elements of both the earlier castellated fortress style and the later style of the more accessible community center.

### **First Battalion Virginia Volunteers Infantry / Leigh Street Armory**

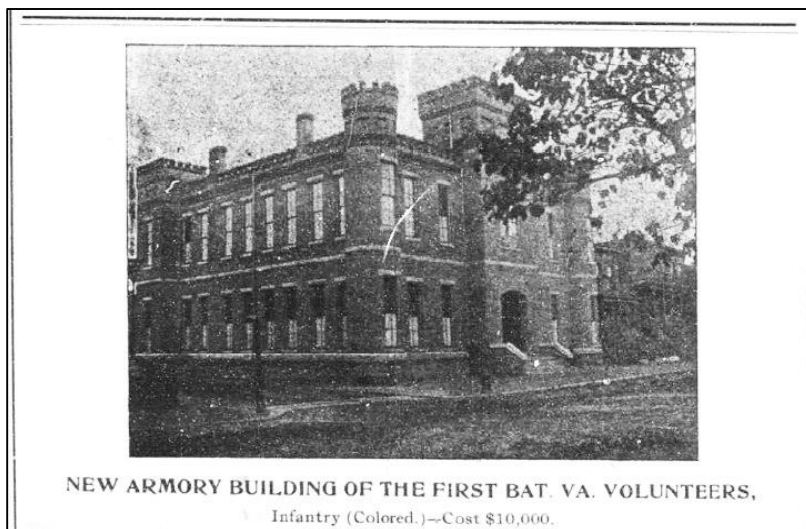


Figure 1. Source: *Richmond Planet*, December 21, 1895.

The First Battalion Virginia Volunteers Infantry Armory was constructed in 1895 in the Jackson Ward neighborhood and is believed to be the oldest remaining armory building in the Commonwealth of Virginia and the oldest armory of a black militia company in the United States. It also holds the distinction of being one of only three armories built in the country exclusively for black militias.

That the Leigh Street Armory was built at all in a time when Reconstruction was giving way to increasingly restrictive Jim Crow laws was due largely to the political influence and efforts of John Mitchell, Jr., editor of the *Richmond Planet* newspaper, and Major Joseph B. Johnson, commander of the First Battalion. Mitchell and Johnson spent ten years lobbying the Richmond government to build the Armory for the First Battalion Virginia Volunteers, which had met and drilled in rented rooms since 1876 when the unit was established. The City of Richmond ultimately paid \$10,000 towards its construction. John Mitchell also was instrumental in securing the construction contract for a prominent masonry contractor, Armstead Walker. Walker, the husband of banker and businesswoman Maggie Walker, played a major role in city politics to fight for rights and privileges for the black community.

This building was designed by Wilfred Emory Cutshaw, who as City Engineer oversaw an extensive building program during his tenure from 1873 until his death in 1907. His projects included the massive Gothic-style Pump House, reservoir, lakes and roads in William Byrd Park, many schools, markets, armories and a number of other city projects. Cutshaw's influence and his preference for the Italianate style was reflected in the distinctive window surrounds, belt courses and corbeling brickwork that are a hallmark of that style. The building's turrets echoed similar features of the Cavalry Armory and the Howitzers Armory, buildings that once stood back-to-back linked by a covered drill hall between Seventh and Eighth Streets and whose construction was overseen by Cutshaw's office. Although they were demolished in the 1970s, vestiges of their rounded turrets and truncated walls are still visible and now serve as retaining walls around the entrance to the J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College building on the same site. See [Appendix A](#) for images of Richmond's demolished armory structures.

The architectural records of the Library of Virginia include Cutshaw's office files, which preserve both the original plans for the Leigh Street Armory and an alternative design for an unbuilt one-story version reflecting a more classical design. See [Appendix B](#) for images of Cutshaw's two designs and more images of the Leigh Street Armory.

The Leigh Street Armory today looks much as it did when originally constructed. It is a two-story brick structure with a partial basement with brick towers and crenellation along the roof parapet. Distinctive features include a combination of decorative circular turrets, a rectangular tower over the center entrance and a square tower at the northwest corner. The brick façade and side elevations are decorated with granite sills and headers, terra cotta crenellations along the roof parapet and a terra cotta belt course below the roof parapet.

With 51 large windows, the Leigh Street Armory reflects an early phase in the evolution from



fortress to community center occurring elsewhere at the turn of the twentieth century. These windows of four over four panes with headers and sills of granite are noticeably larger than the narrow windows enfiladed for muskets in the Eighth Regiment Armory on New York's Upper East Side built less than a decade before. The central element of the Leigh Street Armory is the square tower rising above the arched main entrance of the building. A terra cotta plaque over the entry reads "1895-First Battalion Virginia Volunteers Infantry -1895."

### **The Richmond Light Infantry Blues Armory**



*Figure 2. Postcard, 1915. Source: VCU Libraries Digital Collection*

The Richmond Light Infantry Blues were formally organized as a company in 1789 and were the oldest continuous military organization in the country until they were incorporated with the National Guard in 1963. They served in every major conflict from the War of 1812 to World War II. Known as the "Blues" due to their distinctive blue uniforms featuring caps with white feather cockades, the Blues were a familiar sight in parades and official functions for many years. One of the most exclusive and socially distinguished militias, many of the members of the Blues were well-established professionals such as lawyers, civil engineers, physicians, dentists, electrical engineers, architects, teachers and chemists. Until 1930, membership in the Blues was by election and one negative vote was sufficient for exclusion.

First called to service to suppress Gabriel's Rebellion in 1800, the unit served in the War of 1812 and later was nearly wiped out in 1862 at the Battle of Roanoke Island while fighting for the Army of Northern Virginia. In 1894, the Blues were formed into a battalion and served in the Spanish American War. In 1903, the Blues were called to help suppress the Richmond streetcar strike. In 1916, they were called for service on the Mexican Border. Later, the Blues fought in France in World War I as part of the 29<sup>th</sup> Division and in World War II.

After a 1907 fire destroyed the rented quarters used by the Blues in a tobacco factory at the northwest corner of Ninth and Cary Streets, the Blues moved into a new armory provided by the City of Richmond at the northeast corner of Marshall and Sixth Streets. Designed by the Washington architectural firm of Averill and Hall, with the assistance of the Washington engineering firm of Marshall and Marshall, the Blues Armory was completed in 1910. The City of Richmond contributed \$12,000 towards its construction.

Solidly constructed of reinforced concrete, the Blues Armory was designed to withstand rioters, but also was designed to accommodate market stalls and booths on the ground floor, with secure entrances to the upper floors housing the militia unit. Historically, the southeast corner of Sixth and Marshall Streets had housed Richmond's thriving "Second Market." Devoting the first floor of the Blues Armory on the north side of Marshall Street to market activities provided a natural extension of that market area and reflected the national trend in regimental armories serving more community-focused uses.

Since the north and east elevations of the Blues Armory abutted adjacent properties, only the south and west elevations feature architectural embellishment. As originally constructed, on the south and west elevations, the building projected over the sidewalks with the public right-of-way passing through an open arcade with five bays on the Marshall Street side and seven bays on the Sixth Street side on the ground floor. The arches are rusticated with stone keystones. The center bay on Sixth Street is enriched with rough-hewn stone blocks. The sides are decorated with crenelated bartizans.

As originally constructed, the first floor openings were sheltered by the arcade with large glass windows to provide light to the ground floor. Four over four windows on the second floor are grouped in threes in each bay and are topped by small square windows which light the mezzanines. Third floor windows are very small and are placed between each of the machicolations. The top of the building is a crenelated parapet.

Inside, the upper levels were reached through the center bay of Sixth Street by a single stair that was designed to be easily defended. Another entrance, intended for the movement of munitions, was located on the Marshall Street side. The second floor was divided into approximately six suites for the individual military companies. Each suite consisted of a high-ceilinged meeting lounge, officer's quarters, and a mezzanine containing lockers for storage. The second floor also had a reception hall, a kitchen and a latrine. In a separate area off the second floor was the munitions room, lined in steel plate, for secure storage of arms.

The third floor contained an expansive wooden-floored drill hall covered by a curved, steel-trussed roof, pierced by skylights. The walls to the north and south of the drill hall were decorated with murals depicting the Blues on ceremonial occasions. Along the west wall is an elevated spectator's gallery, from which the officers and other spectators could review the regiment drill. See [Appendix C](#) for more images of the Blues Armory.

## Current State of the Armories

While the Leigh Street Armory played a significant role in the Jackson Ward neighborhood for many years, it served as an armory only a short time. It was a focal point of neighborhood celebrations and the members of the First Battalion displayed their patriotism in various roles such as leading Emancipation Day and other parades. In 1899, the First Battalion was disbanded after racially motivated conflicts over the system of command (which imposed white officers over black soldiers) and the poor equipment given to black militias, and the general demobilization at the end of the Spanish American War.

The Leigh Street Armory then became an elementary school serving a segregated black population in Jackson Ward until World War II, when the building again housed servicemen of color. During World War II, Richmond's Defense Service Unit struggled to accommodate as many as 1,600 visiting service men every weekend. In segregated Richmond, white GIs were housed on a temporary basis in the large drill halls of the Blues Armory as well as those of the Grays, the Howitzers and the Cavalry. Without a similar large drill hall, the Leigh Street Armory could not accommodate the visiting black GIs passing through Richmond between trains or on temporary assignments, so a gymnasium was built in the rear of the building over the drill yard and the Leigh Street Armory became a USO center. Meticulous records were kept, and thousands of black GIs found a cot and a hot meal at the Leigh Street Armory while thousands of white GIs found lodging in the other larger armories. For many Richmond blacks, supporting the Leigh Street Armory and the servicemen who temporarily called it home became the focus of their war effort.

After the war, the Leigh Street Armory reverted back to being a school and adjunct building to Armstrong High School. It housed several Richmond schools before becoming a City warehouse. A 1985 fire caused extensive damage to the roof. The building stood vacant for nearly two decades until the badly deteriorated roof, floor and joists could be replaced. The gymnasium addition, weakened by neglect, was demolished in 1998. In 2015, the Leigh Street Armory was fully restored and an addition was constructed in the rear where the gymnasium once stood. Over the past few years, a number of groups coalesced to revive the Leigh Street Armory as the Black History Museum and Cultural Center of Virginia, an important cultural institution to be applauded for its restoration efforts, its ambitious program and its work revitalizing the historic Jackson Ward neighborhood.

The Richmond Blues remained headquartered at their armory until the 1960s. One of their last official functions was the participation in the inaugural parade of President John F. Kennedy in 1961. By 1968, the Blues were the oldest continuous military organization in the country, but the reorganization of the National Guard soon eliminated the Blues as an identifiable unit. In the 1980s, the Blues Armory was repurposed as part of the Sixth Street Marketplace shopping center and urban redevelopment project. The portion of Sixth Street abutting the armory was closed to vehicular traffic and a grandly termed "crystal palace" of transparent panels built over

the street. The armory's ground floor was converted into a food court and the second floor was converted into offices. The third floor drill hall fell into disuse, the wooden flooring removed, the magnificent south window covered with plywood and the skylights filled. Since the failure of the Sixth Street Marketplace project, the Blues Armory has been shuttered and remains empty.

Both the Leigh Street Armory and the Blues Armory are on the Virginia Landmarks Register and the National Register of Historic Places.

### **Our Vision**

Historic Richmond's vision is for a Richmond that protects and celebrates its unique and historic built environment as a cornerstone of its greatness. We believe Richmond's irreplaceable built environment defines its distinctive character, and that maintaining and building on that unique sense of place is fundamental to Richmond's brilliant future.

An important component of our vision for Richmond is a fully restored Blues Armory serving as a catalyst to spark revitalization in an important Downtown district. With the energy of the Convention Center to the west, an increasingly dynamic Broad Street one block to the south, Richmond's largest entertainment venue in the Coliseum next door to the north, and the considerable government, business and tourism engines to the east, the handsome, large and historic Blues Armory building has the potential to be the heart of a revitalized enterprise and tourism zone.

The built environment of the past provides the potential to serve the present and enrich the future. This was never so true as in the case of the Blues Armory building, today on the cusp of adaptive reuse. We invite you to visit the Black History Museum to experience the amazing potential of these old buildings, and then stroll through Jackson Ward to see the Blues Armory and picture the potential inherent in this unique building. Walk with us from armory to armory, experience the past, and imagine how we can shape the future!



**Appendix A: Richmond's Demolished Armories**

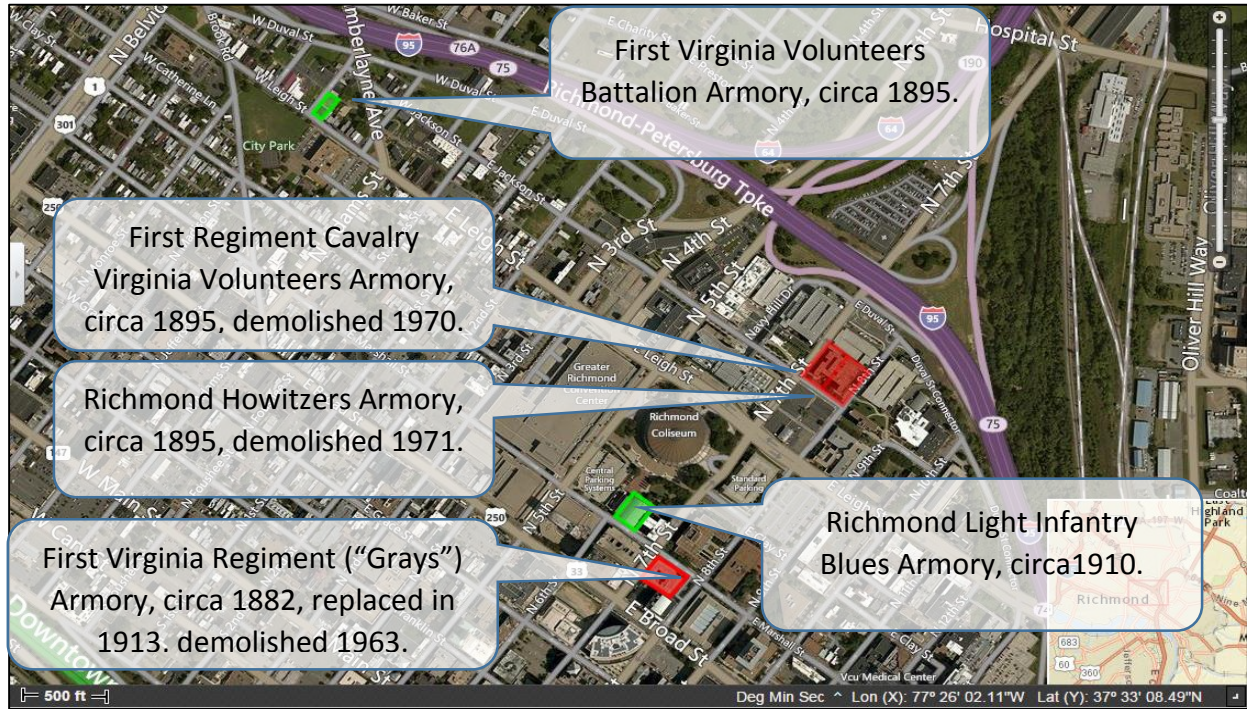


Figure 3. Richmond's Armories. Green (extant), red (no longer extant).

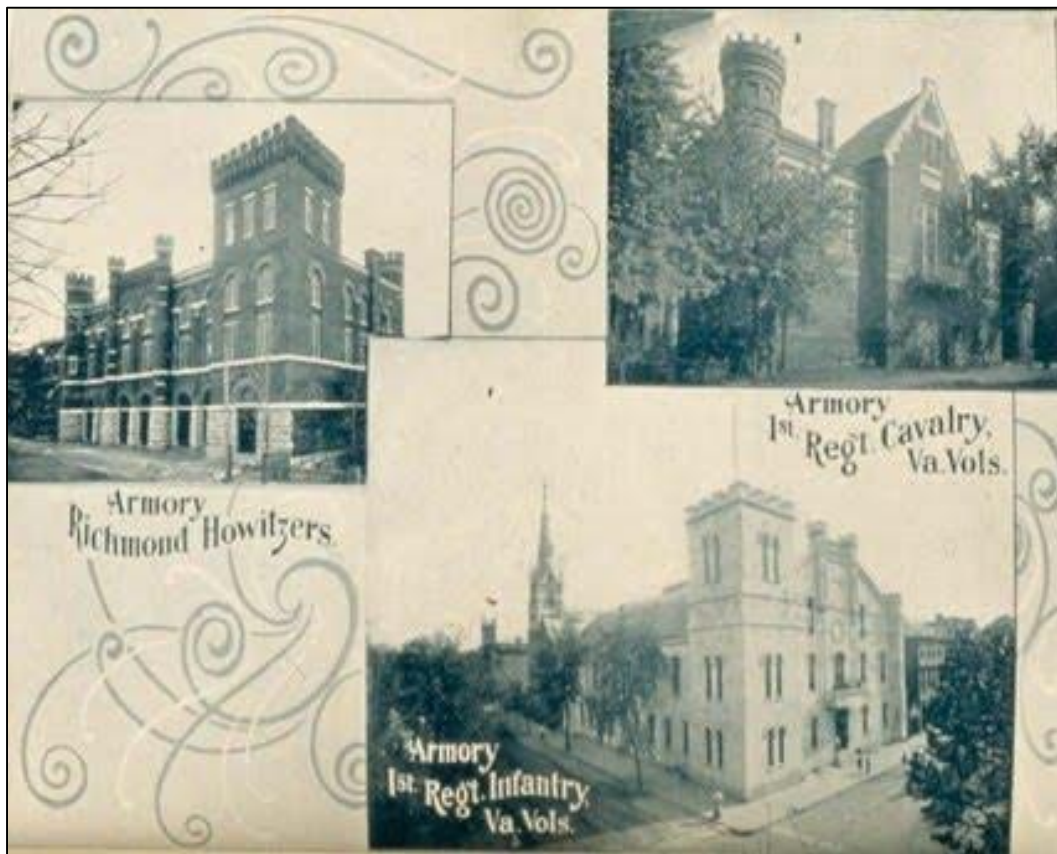


Figure 4. Richmond Armories that are no longer extant. Source: VCU Libraries Digital Collection.

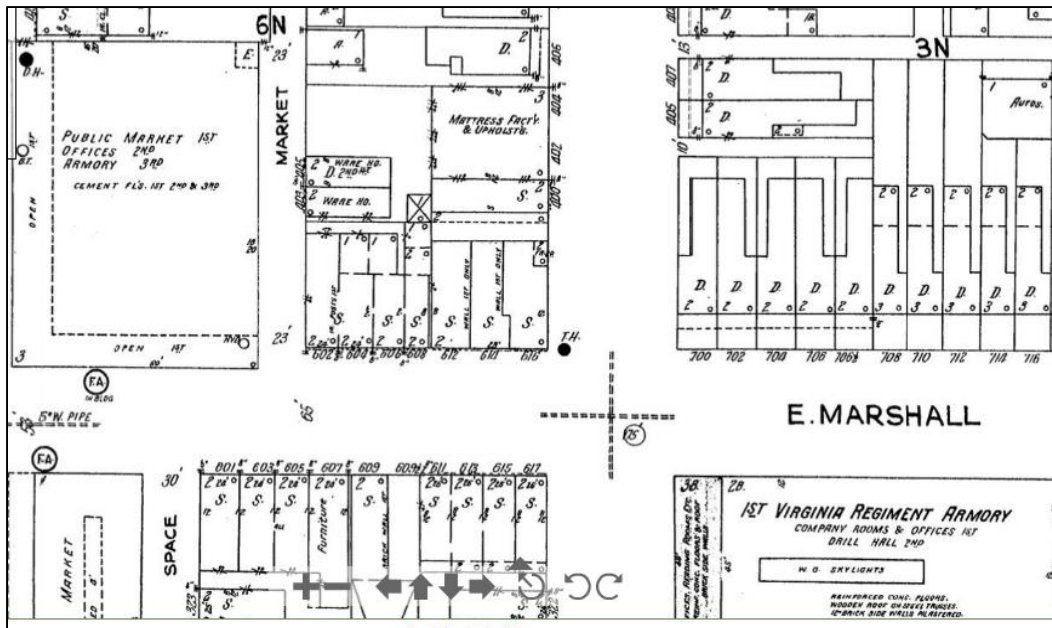


Figure 5. First Virginia Regiment Infantry (The "Grays") Armory (demolished 1963) and the Blues Armory (still extant). 1924 Sanborn Map.

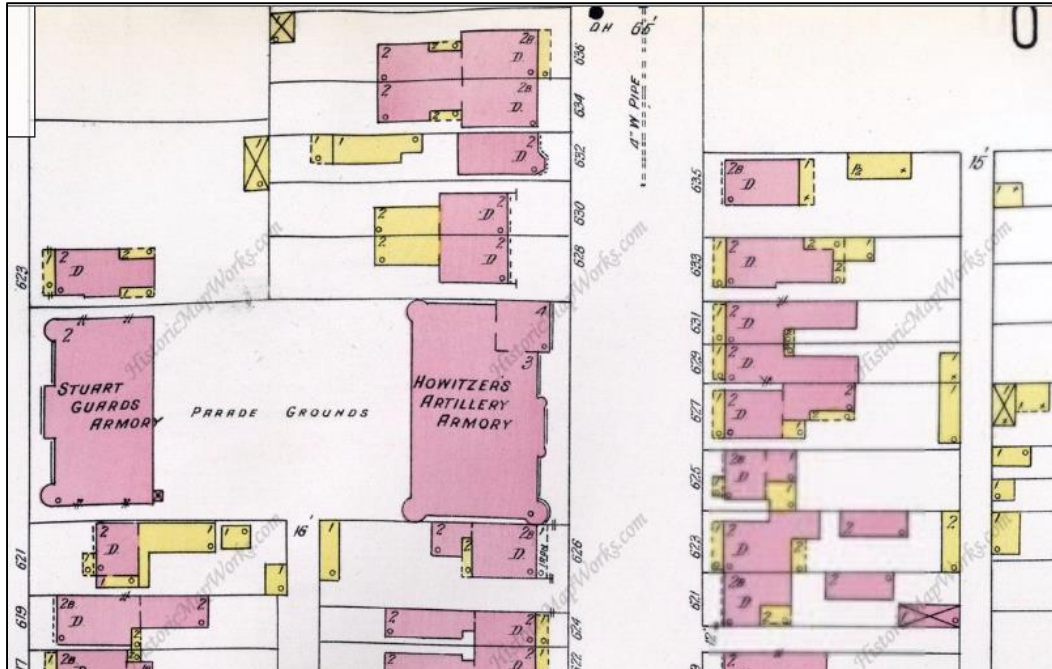


Figure 6. Richmond Howitzers Armory and First Regiment Cavalry Armory. 1905 Sanborn Map.



**Appendix B: The Leigh Street Armory**

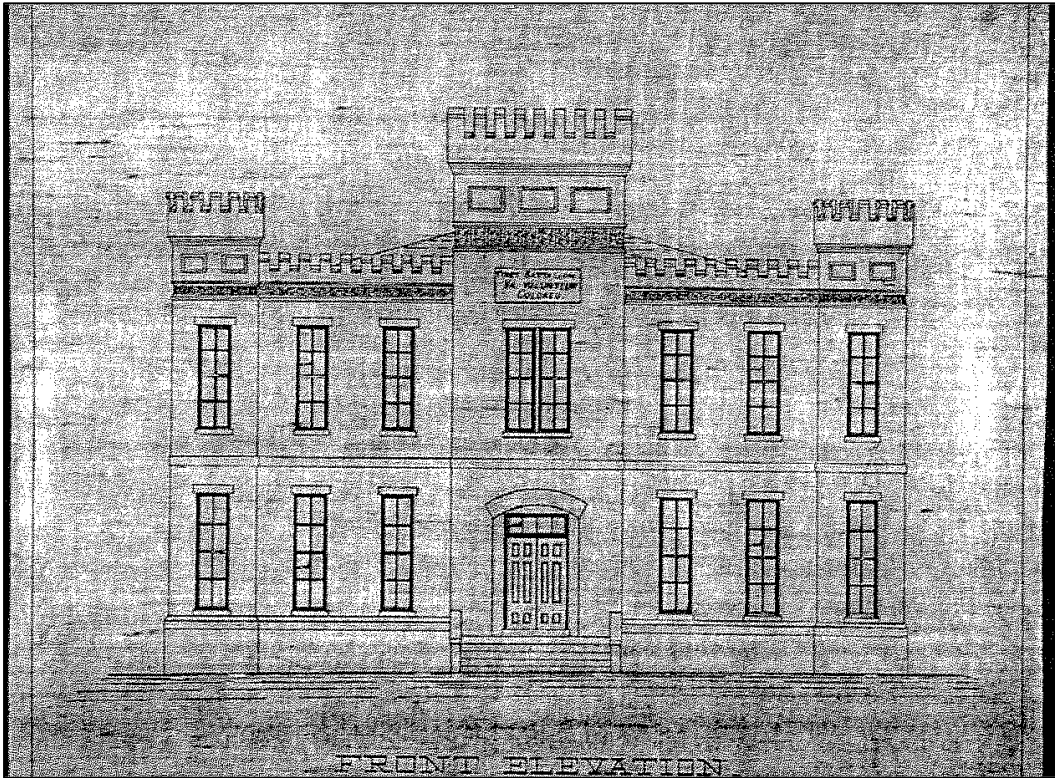


Figure 7. Drawing of Leigh Street Armory as built by Cutshaw. Source: Department of Historic Resources.

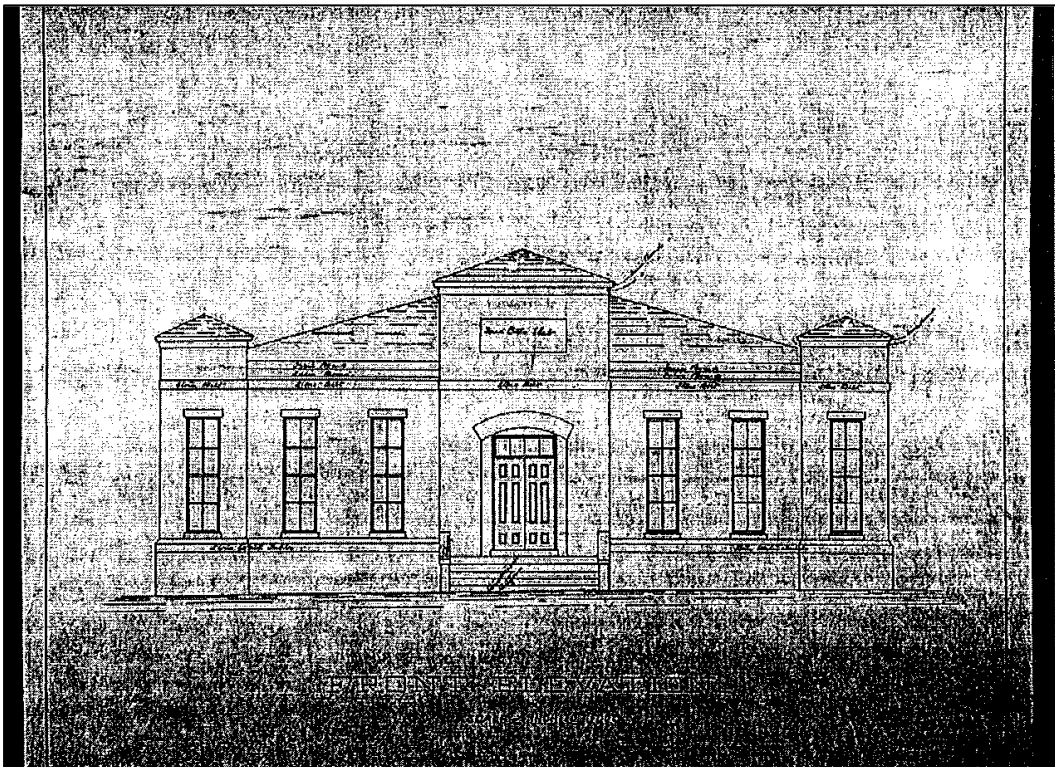


Figure 8. Alternative design for Leigh Street Armory by Cutshaw. Source: Department of Historic Resources.





Figure 9. Leigh Street Armory, March 2016. Source: Historic Richmond.



Figure 10. Tower and cornice details on the Leigh Street Armory. Source: Historic Richmond.



**Appendix C: The Blues Army**



Figure 11. Blues Army, October 9, 2014. Source: James H. Wallace, Richmond Times Dispatch.



Figure 12. Blues Army and Crystal Palace. November 2015. Source: Historic Richmond.





Figure 13. Murals on south side of third floor drill hall. Source: Historic Richmond.



Figure 14. Mural on third floor drill hall. Source: Historic Richmond.



*Figure 15. Richmond's Second Market at the Blues Armory, no date. Source: Sanford, Richmond, 1975.*



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*Additional thanks are extended to Selden Richardson for his review and contributions to this article.*