first read *The Politics of Annexation* in 2005, during my time as a graduate student at the University of Virginia’s Corcoran Department of History. By that time, the book was over thirty years old. Since 1982, much had been made of Richmond, Virginia’s role in slavery, industrial tobacco production, the American Civil War, and the Confederacy. Until very recently, the history of twentieth-century Richmond was anemic by comparison. Even less had been written about modern Richmond: namely, twentieth-century black Richmonders and their struggle for civil rights. Of the small, yet sound scholarship that existed on modern Richmond, three names dominated the literature: Rutledge Dennis, John Moeser, and Christopher Silver. Few of us knew it in 2005, but a handful of historians were endeavoring toward a new political and urban history. We were not alone. Nor were we the first scholars to foray into the affairs of urban political history. Moeser and Dennis had already methodically excavated mid-century Richmond history. In doing so, they unearthed something in *The Politics of Annexation* that urban and political historians were just beginning to understand in 2005—local politics matters.

*The Politics of Annexation* was not merely ahead of its time; it has stood the test of time. In 1982, modern urban history was relatively unchartered scholarly territory. Experts still did not quite fully understand how mid-twentieth-century demographic trends and urban redevelopment had actually shaped America’s cities. During the twilight of the twentieth century, *de jure* segregation still cast a considerable shadow over Richmond (and the South generally). Historians now have a more robust understanding of what these two authors thoroughly described in the early 1980s. By the 1960s, American cities began to suffer from suburbanization, deindustrialization, and weakening economies. The suburbanization of jobs, income, and taxable revenue followed the out-migration of white people. Not only was this movement into America’s suburbs one of the greatest migrations of human beings in the history of humanity, it was largely subsidized by the federal government. As
African Americans moved in and whites moved away, cities such as Richmond did not simply struggle financially; local, state, and national officials used the power vested in segregated governing bodies to perpetuate African American second-class citizenship. Schools failed. Freeways purposefully destroyed vulnerable neighborhoods. Bankers jacked up interest rates on middle-income homeowners or denied loans to inner-city residents all together. Restrictive covenants also precluded residential integration. All of this made the compression of impoverished African Americans into poorly funded public housing projects even worse. These designs had grave consequences for cities such as Richmond. After eight years of failed border expansions, the City of Richmond, on January 1, 1970, annexed twenty-three square miles and 47,000 people from Chesterfield County. On its face, Richmond annexed portions of Chesterfield County to meet these urban challenges. Rutledge Dennis and John Moeser were unconvinced. We should be thankful for their doubt. Their skepticism, which culminated in this book, broadened our understanding of not just Richmond’s history, but also urban history as well.

It cannot be understated that this book was and is only nominally about the annexation of Chesterfield County. It does not merely depict the small handful of well-heeled whites that dominated Virginia politics before and immediately after the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (VRA). It also explains how African Americans activated the machinery of intensely organized, yet increasingly segregated communities to contend with these oligarchs. In analyzing how and why the annexation of Chesterfield County occurred, this work not only enriched our understanding of municipal- and state-level politics during the end of the Jim Crow era; it also emphasized the age-old dialectic between vested white interests and the black freedom struggle. These power struggles were a defining feature of the segregated system. If paternalism and poll taxes helped a small handful of white elites disproportionately control Virginia politics for most of the twentieth century, these forces also made it possible for whites to “hold the line against attempts by blacks to force wide-scale political and economic changes” after 1965. But African Americans, the following pages establish, had their own plans.

*The Politics of Annexation* is one of the first scholarly attempts to explain the uniqueness of civil rights activism in Richmond. In fact, much of what experts initially knew about the Richmond Crusade for Voters, its founders, and the politicized nature of black activism in Richmond originated within these pages. To this day, popular fascination with civil disobedience often
overshadows just how thoroughly organized black communities were before and during the American civil rights movement. In drawing attention to organizations such as the Crusade for Voters, these two authors underscored two things that contemporary activists would be wise to study—the strategies of civil rights activists were more varied than often told. And they varied because local people worked within the context of local circumstances to create the conditions needed to challenge Jim Crow. In Richmond, local people had been effectively organized for decades. Sit-in movements of the early 1960s were made possible by the types of hidden organization that this book so painstakingly emphasizes. Indeed, Richmond’s contribution to the freedom struggle had little to do with direct-action strategies or civil disobedience. Thanks to these authors, we now know that legal activism and political organization were Richmond’s gift to the movement. That chapter is as important to the freedom struggle as Martin Luther King, Jr.’s moral suasion, Ella Baker’s commitment to young people, Whitney Young’s dedication to economic uplift, and A. Philip Randolph’s labor movement. African Americans in Richmond were the legatees of Charles Hamilton Houston’s legal activism at Howard University and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People’s litigation strategy. It is within this book that we begin to understand precisely how Richmonders used this brand of activism to shift the balance of local political power. And, they did it years before the federal government passed voting rights legislation—in fact, segregationists, under the auspices of Harry F. Byrd’s reputed “machine,” allowed some African Americans to vote well before 1965. If Curtis Holt is this book’s hero, he did not change the complexion of Richmond politics alone. Holt, this story explains, stood on the shoulders of organizations such as the Crusade and career-litigants like Oliver W. Hill.

Any historical understanding of the city’s district-based election system, which was groundbreaking in the 1970s and still exists to this day, begins here. Majority–minority districts led immediately to the election of the city’s first black mayor (Henry Marsh, III) and the black-majority city council in 1977. These districts were a product not only of annexation but also of the rights revolution taking place in Washington. In The Dream Is Lost: Voting Rights and the Politics of Race in Richmond, I wrote:

After 1965, Richmond was part of a much larger revolution in voting rights. Curtis Holt’s claim that annexation diluted blacks’ votes ran Richmond
right into a national voting rights revolution. This so-called reapportionment revolution, which local litigants started, Earl Warren's Court accommodated, and Warren Burger's Court strengthened, went beyond safeguarding access to the suffrage. As whites devised structural barriers to dilute the voting power of recently enfranchised African Americans, federal officials began to protect a minority group's right to elect preferred representatives in a manner that was commensurate with their total voting-age population.

If the court recognized that machinations such as annexations diluted blacks' votes, they had local people to thank. In fact, Curtis Holt, whose lawsuit claimed that race motivated annexation, all but ensured that Richmond was a part of this electoral revolution. What is more, recent assaults on key provisions in the VRA make Holt's story in this book all the more important. If opposition to the VRA culminated in *Shelby County v. Holder* (which effectively gutted Section 4 of the VRA by prohibiting triggering mechanisms as a basis for subjecting jurisdictions to federal supervision), this resistance dates back to the 1960s. Washington implemented Richmond's majority–minority districts system to give African Americans back the proportional electoral power they lost after annexation. Racial redistricting not only protected a minority group's right to elect candidates but also allowed minority voters to elect preferred candidates free of white interference. In telling the story of Chesterfield annexation, this book was one of the first efforts to hone in on the Machiavellian outburst of anti-VRA sentiment at the local level. It was also one of the first efforts to explain how the Supreme Court resolved the issue of indirect disenfranchisement after 1965.

Whether they knew it at the time or not, Moeser and Dennis were actually highlighting a key facet of American political development. The political abuses of electoral reforms have been a continuous and unfortunate feature of U.S. political history, and politics following the VRA was no exception to this rule. The United States, experts argue, repeatedly sways back and forth between greater political access and more political limitations. If officials implemented majority–minority districts during the 1970s to counteract machinations such as Richmond's annexation of Chesterfield County, they also designed these districts to compensate for the historical wrongs against African Americans generally. In cataloguing the complex series of litigation that culminated in Richmond's district-based system, the authors captured a rare
moment in American political history where the Supreme Court and the Department of Justice actually worked to defend black folks’ rights. At least temporarily.

This account then is also a bittersweet, cautionary tale. If Richmond’s African Americans triumphed over disenfranchisement, they also watched de facto segregation outlive the Jim Crow system itself. Annexation had ominous urban implications. Curtis Holt may have personified African Americans’ triumph over the forces of disenfranchisement, but the public housing resident was also emblematic of intensifying economic and social crises. The politics of annexation might have brought an end to white overrepresentation on Richmond’s city council, but the city’s district system did little to extricate white elites from positions of entrenched power. In fact, by the 1980s, around the same time Moeser and Dennis first published this work, race-based antipathy and obstructionism defined city council. More ominously, residential segregation and economic inequality were facts of life for most of Richmond’s African Americans. The forces that gave rise to annexation (an influx of voting age African Americans, growing poverty, white flight, and struggling schools) were the same circumstances that led to deepening marginalization in Richmond’s black communities. Which gets me to an important point. There is an implicit argument throughout the last portion of this book: voting intensified, rather than alleviated, whites’ fears of democracy in Richmond. This fear eventually grew into skepticism about blacks’ ability to govern the city. African Americans, as history would have it, took political control over Richmond just as the city began to suffer from decades of Jim Crow–era neglect. Whites were more than happy to blame them for Richmond’s problems.

The racial antipathy that led to annexation outlived this story. Richmond’s continuing struggle to overcome segregation has made *The Politics of Annexation* more relevant over time. The annexation of Chesterfield County had unintended consequences. Mainly, it ignited a powder keg of anti-urbanism that continues to affect Richmond and Virginia politics. Virginia has been and remains a “Dillon’s Rule” state. This rule limits counties’ and cities’ power by prohibiting them from amending charters without specific approval by the General Assembly. Both cities and counties, as independent political bodies, have no administrative authority to work with one another beyond rules that have been explicitly mandated by the assembly. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, Virginia’s General Assembly not only remained largely white; racial redistricting and unremitting suburbanization all but ensured white
overrepresentation in the assembly. These residential patterns (and politicians’ abilities to capitalize on them) gave suburbs, exurbs, and rural areas disproportionate power over the commonwealth’s politics. Virginia’s state legislators, who were increasingly Republican after the 1970s and remain so to this day, responded to the flood of annexation requests in the 1960s by imposing a moratorium on new annexations for cities with populations larger than 125,000 people (i.e., Virginia’s cities with sizable minority populations). In 1979, lawmakers passed HB603, which gave counties the right to request immunity from all future annexations. Many of Virginia’s counties, including Henrico and Chesterfield, nullified future boundary expansions—a common municipal practice used to meet demographic challenges. Richmond remains landlocked.

The continuity of Richmond’s tortured racial history has, quite unfortunately, outlasted this book. It is impossible to separate Richmond’s current social problems from the shortsightedness of segregationists illuminated below. The state of contemporary Richmond begs us to question not only the gains of the freedom struggle but also the enduring legacy of segregation. Poverty, residential segregation, and underperforming schools survived the segregated system. Public housing and schools continue to be points of profound discouragement. Between 2006 and 2010, 30 percent of Richmond’s African Americans, roughly 25 percent of the city’s residents, were on or below the poverty line. In 1969, 24 percent of Richmond’s children lived in poverty; that number was an astonishing 39 percent after the Great Recession of 2008–2009. Most of these children reside in public housing. And, they attend obsolescently segregated schools in the immediate vicinity of public housing. African Americans made up roughly 50 percent of Richmond’s population in 2010 yet composed 80 percent of the Richmond Public School system. Many of Richmond’s school buildings are also in a state of severe dilapidation. It is this disrepair and dispossession that motivates many residents to keep their children out of the system. Jim Crow segregation, in other words, has twenty-first-century implications.

There are, however, developments that this book did not foretell. In recent years, Richmond has undergone a transformation. To be sure, decades of disinvestment in the central city depressed property values and heightened vacancy rates, but these low values and high vacancy rates have given rise to unprecedented reinvestment. Richmond’s population in 2010 stood at 210,309—the highest it has been since 1986. As of 2015, this population
growth outpaced growth in the counties. Downtown Richmond, which was a veritable ghost town during the 1980s and 1990s, has witnessed an outburst of retail, restaurant, business, and educational growth. This so-called “Great Inversion”—the movement of affluent young people and retirees back into cities—has profound implications for the capital city’s present and future. In fact, recent demographic trends have reversed nearly five decades of population decline. In 2019, African Americans made up roughly 48 percent of the population. They are, for the first time in decades, no longer the majority population. Richmond’s white population has not only grown considerably since 1990, but the number of people that describe themselves as more than one race has tripled since 2000. All told, the city has taken part in and witnessed trends that belie nearly fifty years of decline. Some of these developments point toward promise, while others remain intolerable anachronisms.

In telling the story of Richmond’s annexation, both Moeser and Dennis demonstrated that cities are a series of human decisions. Urban spaces do not grow organically, nor are these spaces blank slates—people have often brought their biases to bear on the nature of urban planning. Contemporary generations inherit these biases. The annexation of Chesterfield County was a watershed moment in Richmond politics—in large part because of its lasting impression on the shape of the city. Yet, this book does not simply delineate annexation for its own sake. It uses this event to interrogate mid-twentieth-century Richmond’s identity. Ultimately, the book has proven indispensable in helping describe how Richmond got to now. It will be even more valuable in pointing the way forward.