

# Heroes: What They Do & Why We Need Them

## *A Commentary on Today's Heroes*



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## Harry Potter: The Perfect Fictional Hero

□ [October 20, 2017](#) [Fictional Heroes](#)



By Annie Ryan

It may seem obvious that Harry Potter is a hero. After all, he does save the world from the evil that is Lord Voldemort. But what kind of hero is he? According to [Goethals and Allison's \(2012\) taxonomy of heroism](#), Harry fits best in the *traditional hero* category, in which the hero completes the the class hero's journey as described by [famed](#)

[mythologist Joseph Campbell](#).

Throughout the series' cumulative 4100 pages, Harry follows the major stages of the hero's journey: *departure*, *initiation*, and *return*. When we first meet Harry, he is an obedient, insecure, and lonely boy who lives in a closet. He has no friends and no one who cares about him, and he accepts that this is his life. Fortuitously, Harry is

plucked out of this mundane life, never to return again. In this new world, he is famous, adored, and is expected to do great things.

In his initiation stage, a second taxonomic system can be included in defining Harry Potter as a hero. Harry belongs in the category of *underdog*, an important hero-type in Franco, Blau, & Zimbardo's (2011) taxonomy of heroism. He is in a world where everyone exceeds him in knowledge and experience. At Hogwarts, almost all the students grew up with wizards, and have had exposure to magic. Harry is an underdog on the traditional hero's journey.

This underdog theme persists throughout the various books: he is the only first-year Quidditch player, is more sensitive to the dementors that are brought into Hogwarts than the other students, and is the only under-age student in the Triwizard Tournament. Most importantly, his archenemy, Lord Voldemort, is a brilliant wizard with powerful wizards as his allies. Harry is an amateur wizard, and his allies are amateur wizards for the majority of obstacles he faces.



Inspiring underdogs often emerge as leaders. Harry has had various labels assigned to him, including “The Boy Who Lived”, “The Chosen One”, “Undesirable Number One”, and “a lying show-off”. There’s no denying that Harry embraces his role in the war against Voldemort, and he begins to become a leader. He heads the rebel organization Dumbledore’s Army, is Quidditch Captain, and is ultimately commander-in-chief of the Battle of Hogwarts, which results in the defeat of Lord Voldemort and the Death Eaters. His influence is so strong that people continued to fight and die for him even after they thought he was dead.

His death suggests that Harry fits into a second category in Franco et al.’s taxonomic structure of heroes, the *martyr*. In one of the final chapters of the books, Harry sacrifices his own life in order to defeat Lord Voldemort and save the world. But even before his ultimate sacrifice, Harry risks his life to help others. Harry completes dangerous tasks to stop Lord Voldemort from reaching the Sorcerer’s Stone, enters the Chamber of Secrets to save Ginny Weasley’s life, and almost drowns saving Gabrielle Delacour. In *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, Harry breaks into the Ministry of Magic, Gringotts, and Hogwarts under the risk of capture and subsequent death in order to destroy the Horcruxes and thus Lord Voldemort.

One could say that Harry’s return stage begins after he dies. After Lord Voldemort

“kills” him, he talks to his mentor, Albus Dumbledore, and finally learns all the information to defeat Lord Voldemort. As with all great heroes, Harry returns to Earth, his transformation complete. He can finally complete his journey, and although he never physically returns to the Muggle world where he started, he is rejoined with everything he loves. After coming back from the dead, Harry is the true heroic leader everyone expected him to be.

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## Chen Si: The Hero Who Offers Hope to Suicide

### Attempters

□ September 26, 2017    [Unsung Heroes](#)

**By Kathryn Lynch**

Human connections are a fickle and funny thing. Throughout our lifetimes we may pass by thousands of people without giving a



second thought to who they are or where they're going. Yet one simple interaction

can completely alter the course of someone's life. We only have to pay attention.

Chen Si of Nanjing, China is an ordinary man of simple means. In 2003, he was barely able to make a living selling vegetables in a downtown market. It was then he began his daily walk down the Nanjing Yangtze River bridge, the most popular site for suicides on record. China has more deaths by suicide than any other country in the world, at over 280,000 a year — twice the rate of the United States. The first day in 2003 he saved a man's life after grabbing him from the railing and tackling him to the ground.

After that event, Si took it upon himself to serve as guardian angel to those who wished to end their lives on the bridge. He built a small house next to the entrance to the bridge, where he has lived alone for the past 11 years. Each year Si saves an estimated 144 people.

Throughout his service, he has seen people with problems of all kinds, but all are plagued by the same inescapable pain and hopelessness. According to Si, "I know they are tired of living here. They have had difficulties. They have no one to help them."

But Chen Si's heroism goes beyond the physical act of saving one's life. He provides salvation. He gives hope and direction where there is none. One story he remembers is of a woman whose



abusive husband left her and her 3-month old child with nothing. She had no education, no job, and no means of caring for the child. She hoped that her death would require her husband to take care of her baby. After convincing her to leave the bridge with him, Si tracked him down and brought his wife and child with him. After

the husband spit in his face, Si responded, "I am her brother now. If you ever hurt her again, I am not going to let you get away with it." The couple left, and Chen hasn't heard from them again.

There have been countless others. The billionaire who lost everything. The student who couldn't handle failure. The dreamer who bet it all and lost in the big city. Si has talked to all of them. And while he cannot alter the circumstances that bring them to that point, he feels it is his responsibility to try and put them on a better path. "I always have to tell them there is nothing I can't solve," Chen said. "It's a lie. Yet I have to keep on telling the lie, to make them think things will get better."

Chen Si teaches us that those at their lowest point in life, those who are so lost that they feel that they will never find their way again, are in the most need of our help. Many of the people on that bridge did not want Chen Si's kind words and strong hands to pull them back from the edge — they pushed him away and yelled in his



face, content to accept their fate, and did not believe they were worthy of help and compassion.

It is easy to be a hero where there is a hole to fill, where people actively look for

someone to protect and care for them and give their love in return. Chen Si's true heroism lies in his ability to look for those who do not advertise their struggle. Those who have given up hope that a hero will ever appear. Many of us in a similar situation would wonder how to address such a problem of this magnitude, how to save people who have no desire to be saved.

To Chen Si, there is no choice or considerations to make. "There is a saying in China," he says, "the prosperity of a nation is everyone's responsibility. How can we all avoid this responsibility?"

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*Kathryn Lynch is an undergraduate enrolled in Scott Allison's Heroes and Villains First-Year Seminar at the University of Richmond. She composed this essay as part of her course requirement. Kathryn and her classmates are contributing authors to the forthcoming book, **Heroes of Richmond, Virginia: Four Centuries of Courage, Dignity, and Virtue.***

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## The Heroism of Daryl Davis, Collector of Robes

[□ September 1, 2017](#) [Activist Heroes, Unsung Heroes](#)



**By Rick Hutchins**

To those who took part in the social revolution of nearly half a century ago, the 21st century was expected to be a time of Utopian ideals. Instead, the world has entered a Dark Age of growing extremism, in which hate-mongering and race-baiting have

replaced efforts to promote positive change. Instead of leaving the world a better place than they found it, the aging architects of that revolution have had to watch their accomplishments undermined and eroded.

This has led to an atmosphere of despair. Many wonder how we can come back from a culture war in which every day brings escalated rhetoric and the threat of increasing violence.

The answer, of course, is the same as it has always been. The only way to win a war of ideas is to win the hearts and minds of the people. And the only way to truly win hearts and minds is to be right.

For several decades now, a man named Daryl Davis has been doing just that, in a manner that is as unlikely as it is courageous. Davis, who holds a bachelor's degree in music and who has performed with artists such as Chuck Berry and Jerry Lee Lewis (to say nothing of his own band), is a Black man who was a child during the Civil Rights Era. He experienced firsthand the harsh reality of that struggle when he became the first Black member of a local Cub Scout troop in

Massachusetts. But his innate intellectual curiosity combined with his benevolent disposition to form a most unique reaction to the problem of racism.



It was in 1983 that Davis met a member of the Ku Klux Klan for the first time, in a bar in Maryland where Davis was performing. This proved to be an educational experience for both men. For the Klansman, because he had never known a Black man before and so was suddenly seeing one as a human being. And for Davis because he finally found the answer to the question of how someone could hate him without knowing him — it was because they didn't know him.

The friendship that resulted from this encounter not only turned this Klansman away from the Klan, but showed Daryl Davis his path forward.

Over the course of the years that followed, demonstrating patience and tolerance that can only be described as superhuman, Davis met many more Klansmen, by arranging introductions, setting up interviews, and even getting himself invited to Klan meetings. He believed that most racists hold their beliefs because of misconceptions instilled in them in their childhoods, and that it is difficult to maintain these prejudices when confronted with an actual person who belies them.

In short, he believed that the cure for ignorance is education, that the cure for suspicion is kindness, and that the cure for hatred is friendship. In this, he has been proven correct many times over.

Davis is currently in possession of more than two dozen KKK robes, given to him by former Klansmen who have abandoned their ideology, disarmed by the mere existence of this good-natured peacemaker. Among those who have



foresworn White supremacy in favor of a Black friend is Roger Kelly, former Imperial Wizard of the Maryland KKK. Kelly later invited Davis to be his daughter's godfather.

Unbelievably, or perhaps not given the current political climate, Davis has been on the receiving end of criticism from some who self-identify as Progressives, including some members of Black Lives Matter and the NAACP. He has been called an Uncle Tom, and worse, and his achievements have been minimized and trivialized. After all, say his detractors, what difference does it make that in thirty years one man has softened only a smattering of hearts, has changed only a handful of minds?

But what if everyone was like Daryl Davis?

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*Rick Hutchins* was born in Boston, MA, and has been an avid admirer of heroism since the groovy 60s. In his quest to live up to the heroic ideal of helping people, he has worked in the health care field for the past twenty-five years, in various capacities. He is also the author of *Large In Time*, a collection of poetry, *The RH Factor*, a collection of short stories, and is the creator of *Trunkards*. Links to galleries of his art, photography and animation can be found on <http://www.RJDiogenes.com>.

*Hutchins* is a regular contributor to this blog. Two of his published essays, on astronaut and scientist Mae Jemison and the *Fantastic Four's* Reed Richards, can be found in our book *Heroic Leadership*.

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# General George Custer and Why Movies are

## Important

□ August 14, 2017    [Legendary Heroes](#), [War Heroes](#)



By **J. A. Schultz**

Movies aren't history.

That goes almost without saying. Very different skills are needed between recording something for posterity and bringing a rousing tale to the screen. And as such what is shown to an audience should always be taken with a grain of salt. Facts can be altered for the cause of entertainment. Events can change, sometimes beyond recognition, for the sake of the plot.

However, movies should not be dismissed completely out of hand. For while they are not an accurate recording of history they are in fact preserved moments in time. What film and television record are how people (the writers and the audience they were made for) perceived the world around them. What made the hero? What made the villain?

A good example of the intersection of fact and fiction is the life of General George Armstrong Custer.

The Custer of history, the man of flesh and blood, is best known for the worst day of his life: the Battle of Little Big Horn when the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry met the united tribes of Lakota Sioux and Cheyenne. Custer and his regiment would not survive but odd, at times nearly unrecognizable, doppelgangers would be born from that moment of time. Doppelgangers that continue to exist to this day.

The first of those fictional creations actually occurred within a few short years after the battle, though not yet on film. "Buffalo" Bill Cody incorporated the event in his wild west show, that for a while even

starred Custer's lifetime nemesis, Chief Sitting Bull. The show portrayed what would become the familiar tale of Custer: the noble warrior valiantly fighting a hopeless battle against impossible odds.



It wasn't long before the story told before a live audience found its way to the burgeoning medium of film. Custer the hero would make his way into films like *The Santa Fe Trail* (1940), *They Died With Their Boots On* (1941), *7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry* (1956), and much later in TV series like *Cheyenne* (Season 4 episodes "Gold, Glory, and Custer"). The man standing on the hill, surrounded by enemies and betrayed by allies, making his last stand. It would become the version of Custer that most people would become familiar with, whether they agreed with it or not.

Yet oddly this wouldn't be the only doppelganger to come to life in the realm of the screen.

The first embryonic version of a less noble Custer came in the form of Lieutenant Colonel Owen Thursday in the 1948 film *Fort Apache*. While not actually playing Custer, actor Henry Fonda portrays a character whose overconfidence and arrogance eventually leads his command into a massacre very much like that of Little Big Horn. But the full iteration of this new Custer would come in later films like *Little Big Man* (1970), The French/Italian farce *Don't Touch the White Woman!* (1974), the alternately-historical *The Court Martial of George Armstrong Custer* (1977), and *A Night at the Museum: Battle for the Smithsonian* (2009). Custer was now a bumbling fool at best or a murderously insane madman at worst. The nadir of this version of Custer came in the 1990s TV series *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman* where Custer was a brutal sadist who was a threat to friend and enemy alike. Custer the Hero still exists but now he has to share space with Custer the Villain and Custer the Buffoon.

Yet these doppelgangers — the noble hero and the bumbling killer — actually say more about us, the writers and the audience, than the real man. In the time since Little Big Horn society has changed. Attitudes towards Native Americans, tastes in

entertainment, and the tendency to deconstruct heroes rather than build them all conspire to change how we view historical figures. It's no longer



popular to portray a General of an aggressive, expanding power — as the United States was in the 1800s — as a heroic figure (and even that sentence alone could likely cause heated debate).

And this is why movies and television are important when it comes to understanding heroes. They are our collective unconscious where our dreams and fears are given form. Our concepts of morality and nobility are played out. Frozen moments, like insects trapped in amber, that tell us what the world was like when they were made. They tell us what was important to those making them whether we agree with them or not. Modern sensibilities cannot alter them. Films and television may be suppressed, “re-imagined”, or edited but something of the tales will remain. We may not always like what we see in these shadows on screen but it is important that we see them for what they are and learn from them.

And maybe be aware of what we’re leaving behind, for today’s on-screen heroes can become tomorrow’s villains.

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*The author, Jesse Schultz, is looking forward to seeing the fictionalized versions of his life.*

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## **The Almost Hero**

□ [July 28, 2017](#) [.Commentary and Analysis](#)



**By Rick Hutchins and Scott T. Allison**

If you love heroes and desire to live in a more heroic society, there is no better time to be alive than right now. There is a clear and growing “heroism movement” brewing around the world, manifesting itself in hero conferences, hero activism, and hero research. Underlying each component of the heroism movement is the idea that we can all be heroes, that heroism is not reserved for the few, the special, the elite among us, but rather is within close reach of us all.

Close reach, however, does not mean easy reach.

This brings us to the concept of the “Almost Hero”. The Almost Hero is the person perched on the precipice of heroism, the individual who has heroic capability but doesn’t know it or who attempts to be heroic but just falls short.

In this essay, we consider three types of Almost Heroes.

First, there is the Almost hero who succumbs to the “**bystander effect**”, a phenomenon thrust into public consciousness after **Kitty Genovese was murdered** in 1964. For every instance of a heroic passerby coming to the aid of a person in peril, there is a corresponding tale of those who stand idly by and witness a crime or assault without intervening. It’s the classic case of the road not taken. In one timeline, a person is saved and a hero is made, while in the other there is tragedy for one and a missed opportunity for the other.

What factors decide which outcome prevails? Science has an answer. Studies have shown that people fail to help because they “diffuse responsibility”, which is one’s tendency to assume that other people should do the hard work of heroism instead of oneself.

Of course, Almost Heroism of this type does not apply to those who do not have the option of taking action; one cannot expect the elderly or the disabled to rush into a burning building or dive into a rushing river, nor even



*heroism word on keyboard butto*

expect the average person to engage an overwhelming or armed assailant. Here we are strictly concerned with those who could have acted but for one reason or another failed to do so.

The bystander effect is a striking example of Almost Heroes choosing not to act when action is needed to save lives.

But what about Almost Heroes who do act but whose actions fall short? What are we to make of them?

This brings us to the second type of Almost Hero, the individual who rushes into a burning building to save someone but is overcome with smoke and must return to fresh air before successfully reaching the victim. Or the Almost Hero who attempts CPR on an unbreathing heart attack victim but cannot revive the person. Why should these failed attempts at heroism preclude them from achieving the status of hero?

These attempts are usually referred to as “heroic efforts” or “heroic measures,” acknowledging the intent and the struggle to avert disaster, even if the attempt falls short of success. In this case, the Almost Hero may be judged either generously or harshly by public opinion, depending on the particular circumstances surrounding the event, but the most unforgiving critic of a failed heroic attempt is almost invariably the Almost Hero himself.

But there is a third category of Almost Hero more tragic than either apathy or failure: What of those who sacrifice their own lives in their vain attempt to help another? Shortsighted people may condemn such people as foolhardy, but most of us know better. There is no nobler act than dying in the act of serving others, regardless of the ultimate outcome.

Yet because we live in a society that worships at the altar of the final outcome, this third type of Almost Hero is the most overlooked hero. Behavior speaks volumes. If someone puts herself in harm’s way to help others, she is a hero regardless of the

outcome.

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We conclude with two caveats.

First, we should note that **Zeno Franco**, a renowned heroism scientist, has discussed the idea of “heroic failure”, which does NOT refer to the idea of a failed heroic attempt but rather to the idea of a failure to even try. Franco writes, “By *heroic failure*



what is meant is not that someone tried to be heroic and failed in the process, but rather that a leader’s *heroic imagination* failed, thus not allowing her to see the unfolding crisis events as requiring a heroic response.”

It is incumbent upon all of us to avoid heroic failure, to remain vigilant for opportunities to help others.

Second, we emphasize the benefits of helping others for both the helper and the recipient of helping. It really is a win-win situation. Obviously, the recipient stands much to gain; his or her life may be saved. But what good does helping do the helper?

Researchers have found that we benefit ourselves when we perform acts of kindness. Doing a good deed increases levels of **oxytocin**, a “cardioprotective” hormone that lowers blood pressure, decreases depression, and slows the aging process. Helping others has also been shown to increase optimism, moods, and relationship satisfaction.

So there you have it. Do not settle for Almost Heroism. Settle for nothing less than Full Throttle Heroism that not only benefits the helper and the helpee, but also benefits our entire society. Research has shown that kindness is contagious. We are inspired by tales of heroism, and your act of heroic kindness will produce a ripple effect that can forever alter the heroic mindset of generations to come.

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*This essay represents the first collaboration between Rick Hutchins and Scott Allison. Rick has worked in the health care field for the past twenty-five years, in various capacities. He is also the author of *Large In Time*, a collection of poetry, *The RH Factor*, a collection of short stories, and is the creator of *Trunkards*. Links to galleries of his art, photography and animation can be found on <http://www.RJDiogenes.com>.*

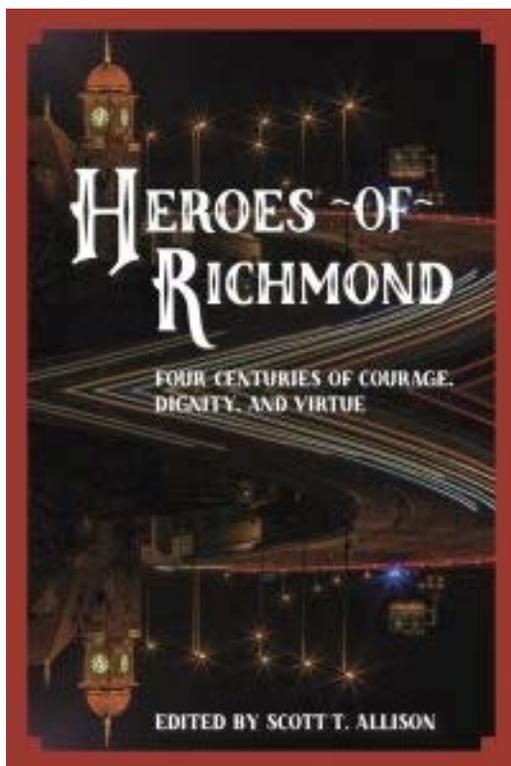
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## **Heroes of Richmond: Four Centuries of Courage, Dignity, and Virtue**

[□ July 14, 2017](#) [. Our latest books on HEROIC LEADERS](#)

It has been hailed as a gorgeous river city blessed with abundant resources. It has also been called the city of “contradictions” and “crises” (Campbell, 2012), a city with a “complicated history” replete with “struggles and wounds” (Ayers, 2012; Schwartz, 2012). Richmond, Virginia, has been a magnet for heroism and villainy, a place where the best and worst of human nature have collided over several centuries.

This volume, *Heroes of Richmond: Four Centuries of Courage, Dignity, and Virtue*, represents an attempt to capture the complex heroic history of a complex city. Authored by a group of outstanding students at the



University of Richmond, this book provides coverage of Richmond's heroes from the first European settlements in the early 1600s to the present day.

**Heroes of Richmond** is now available for purchase [right here](#).

The book offers a review of heroism in Richmond across a wide variety of domains. The authors provide an analysis of social activists **John Mitchell, Jr.**, and **Oliver Hill**; groundbreaking educators such as **Maggie Walker**, **Virginia Randolph**, and **May Keller**; political greats such as **Patrick Henry**, **John Marshall**, **Douglas Wilder**, and **Mary Sue Terry**; selfless heroes such as **Mary Elizabeth Browser**, **E. Claiborne Robins**, **Lora Robins**, and **several unsung citizens**; and iconic legends such as **Pocahontas**, **William Byrd II**, **Edgar Allan Poe**, and **Arthur Ashe**.

**“Superb scholarship about a stunning city of heroes.”** – *Dr. James K. Beggan, Professor of Sociology, University of Louisville*

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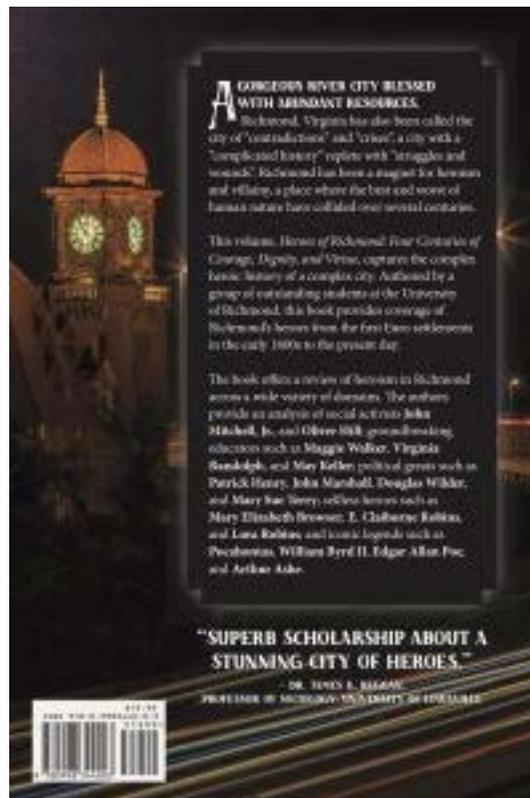
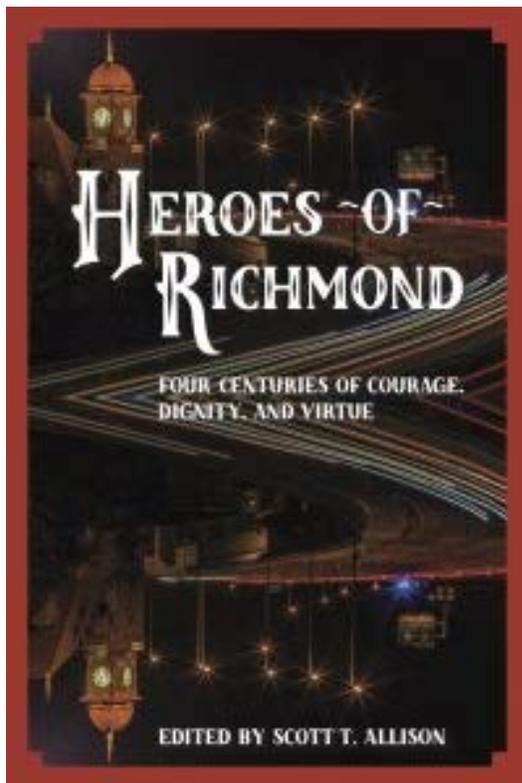
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