# Exploring Almagro: A Historic Walking Trail in Danville, Virginia

Danville is a vibrant, diverse, and thriving city located in South Central Virginia along the North Carolina border. Almagro, a historic Black neighborhood in Danville, is known for its rich cultural heritage, dating back to 1883 (Fisher, T & Sparenborg, K., 2011). In the early 20th century, Almagro became the largest incorporated African American community in Virginia and one of few black incorporated towns in the United States ("Preserving Almagro as a Historic Symbol", n.d.). As is the case in many Black communities throughout the country, the neighborhood experienced decades of historic disinvestment. With the support of the Virginia Walkability Action Institute, this neighborhood will now be home to a new project aimed at preserving and promoting the history of the neighborhood through a walking trail.

## Team:

The Danville team was led by the Virginia Rural Health Association, in collaboration with the City of Danville's Planning and Zoning offices, Shiloh Baptist Church, the Danville Historic Society, and Danville's Board of Tourism. As the project was based in the Almagro neighborhood, the team lead, Kitt Mayo, met regularly with the residents of the neighborhood at neighborhood association meetings to keep everyone engaged throughout the project.

## Goals and Vision:

- Encourage physical activity in an area with poor health outcomes
- Strengthen relationships between the Almagro neighborhood and the City of Danville
- Promote local history through highlighting key landmarks and sharing community stories
- Support community connectedness among Almagro residents while attracting tourism and potential business to the area
- Create a deeper connection between residents and the broader community
- Make the history and neighborhood of Almagro more accessible

## Background:

The Virginia Rural Health Association (VRHA) is a 2023 Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health (REACH) program recipient through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to address racial health disparities in Danville among African American and Hispanic populations. Almagro was identified as a priority area due to its poor health outcomes and the prevalence of chronic diseases. The project focuses on reducing rates of obesity, diabetes, and heart disease by encouraging physical activity. Around the time that the VRHA was bringing together city officials, community members, and other key partners around this project, a representative of the Danville branch decided to join the VWAI to improve the walkability of neighborhoods within Danville. The VWAI provided additional funding and capacity building to help implement Danville's health equity goals through the Almagro historic trail.

The Danville team was awarded $10,000 to create a walking trail in Almagro that serves as a community health initiative and historical preservation effort. The trail will highlight nine important historic sites, including seven buildings and two parks. At each site the trail will include signs with QR codes to allow visitors to hear stories, learn historical facts, and read personal memories shared by Almagro residents. This digital engagement preserves and promotes the neighborhood's history while encouraging movement and community connection.

VWAI Faculty meet with the Danville team to strategize about the future trail.

The logo for the historic trail signage.

The Danville team shows the VWAI team potential stops along the historic trail.

## Outcomes and Impact:

- Meaningful engagement with a historically marginalized community
- The walking trail has been added to the existing historical maps of Danville, increasing awareness of Almagro's history
- City officials of Danville recognized past harms inflicted on Almagro community and the walking path will be included in historic tours of the town
- Long term social and economic benefits, improving community health and pride

Sources:

Fisher, T & Sparenborg, K. (2011). Lost Communities of Virginia. University of Virginia Press. https://www.wdbj7.com/2022/08/15/efforts-being-made-preserve-almagro-black-history-danville/ https://www.change.org/p/preserve-almagro-as-a-historic-symbol-of-self-sufficiency-tourism "Preserving Almagro as a Historic Symbol of Self Sufficiency". Change.org, Accessed 10/29/2024. https://www.change.org/p/preserve-almagro-as-a-historic-symbol-of-self-sufficiency-tourism