BackStory with the American History Guys, the nationally broadcast VFH radio show that moves from today’s headlines through three centuries of U.S. history, has been waiting to take this step for a long time. It’s been seven years since the BackStory Guys—internationally renowned history scholars Peter Onuf, Ed Ayers, and Brian Balogh—first sat down in a studio at VFH, somewhat skeptically regarding the prospect of doing history on the radio and becoming media personalities.

At first, they were The History Guys; then they were the hosts of The History Hotline—both experimental, non-broadcast prototypes of the show that was to come. The BackStory Guys, as they were restyled in 2008, have spent four years hosting a series of monthly episodes, with topics ranging from courtship, to debt, to voting, to Supreme Court nominations in American history. And, as of May 11, BackStory began distributing episodes weekly.

All this happened in precarious economic times, but the Guys and the production team believe in the ultimately auspicious destiny of a program that in its award-winning monthly format has now been broadcast by more than 130 stations (including 29 in the top 50 markets) and that has realized more than 1.4 million podcast downloads.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2
**WHAT MAKES THE SHOW WORK?**

BackStory’s signature sound and spirit of inquiry emanates from the hearts and minds of its genial hosts, whose unscripted brilliance reflects a warmth and rapport that comes from being good friends. Onuf and Balogh are historians at the University of Virginia; Ayers is a historian who also happens to be president of the University of Richmond. Casting their minds across three centuries of American history, they debate each other, engaging callers, interviewing guests, and presenting features.

Of exchanges between Onuf, Ayers, and Balogh, celebrated historian Eric Foner says that the way they handle history “points to contemporary relevance without sacrificing historical nuance and complexity. It brings up to date scholarship out of the ivory tower in ways the public can appreciate.” Novelist Nicholson Baker has called the Guys “three congenial, learned, funny men fly-fishing in the rock-strewn river of American history,” also describing BackStory as “a lovely addition to any radio listener’s life.”

A major-market program director has written of the BackStory Guys’ ability to do “deep dives” while keeping the concepts accessible and not taking themselves too seriously. Between them, Peter, Ed, and Brian have written enough books to fill a small library and penned enough articles to wallpaper the University of Virginia’s historic Rotunda. And yet their appeal is far from “ivory tower.” Their humor and humanity permeate the show, enticing listeners to join them at a metaphorical kitchen table, exploring America’s stories and what they mean.

“If you listen to a lot of the NPR biggies, well, this hangs with the best of them,” says a BackStory fan who calls herself “WikiGirl” in her iTunes review of a podcast. That kind of enthusiasm, voiced for the show by its audience, helped this VFH program win a $350,000 weekly production grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), with added support of $472,500 and counting from other sources. Funding for the weekly version will give BackStory the opportunity to realize its full potential.

While the weekly show was in development, reruns and occasional new episodes continued to air widely, answering and whetting the appetites of listeners who have long been asking for more. If all goes well now, and stations throughout Virginia and around the country make room for the new weekly show as they adjust their schedules, the team hopes BackStory will gradually become a household word.

**BEHIND THE SCENES**

The atmosphere at BackStory’s VFH offices mixes anticipation with the sense of an exciting new challenge and a purpose that’s palpable. A recently hired associate producer is cutting an interview with one of the first black football players at the University of Alabama; another is on the phone with a librarian in Arizona, inquiring about the history of immigration legislation in the state; a third is in studio where she interviews a Civil Rights-era photographer for a show on protests, guided by senior producer Tony Field, who also consults with the show’s technical director over a question of sound quality.

Down the hall, BackStory’s creator and executive producer Andrew Wyndham, just off a phone call about an upcoming live gig with the Organization of American Historians in Milwaukee, is preparing for a meeting with one of the program’s major donors. An hour from now, Onuf, Balogh, and Ayers will take calls from listeners, coordinated by Field and other team members. Before the day is done, Wyndham joins the team as they brainstorm upcoming show themes and explore segment ideas, bringing what he describes as a “cross-generational perspective” to the program’s mission. “Basically,” he says, “BackStory is inspired by our hosts, but our brilliant production team also inspires them, infusing the new weekly shows with a twenty- and thirty-something sensibility, focusing on relevance, story, and radio appeal.”

**BUILDING THE TEAM**

Senior producer Tony Field has led production since BackStory was first launched as a monthly show on public radio back in 2008. With the support of the grant from the NEH, Wyndham and Field embarked on a nationwide talent search aimed at putting together an outstanding creative group of associate producers, committed to making history resound for a large listening audience.

“None of the staff are historians, as such,” notes Field. “And having producers in the studio who are listening to the guys with interested but not academically trained ears is a good approximation of the audience we believe is out
there for our show. People who are interested in stories in depth, interested in big ideas presented in an accessible style.” The staff’s concerns, he adds, reflect that “post—Ira Glass, post—RadioLab sensibility,” which pushes producers to look for innovative, even breakthrough, ways to tell stories.

Visit a BackStory planning meeting, and you’ll see this playing out, as each producer argues for pursuing sometimes-edgy production options—tapping alternative resources, taking new approaches to involving the Guys or engaging their guests, developing attention-getting features, figuring out new ways to introduce listener calls—all with the goal of making history “real” for listeners, strikingly expressing its importance for today. The team, says Wyndham, is convinced that “by conveying history though innovative storytelling done by the leading practitioners of the subject, BackStory can define a new form for radio.” Field and Wyndham have encouraged the producers to make their own contributions—to bring their individual backgrounds and unique interests to the table as well.

Eric Mennel, a 2010 Florida State graduate, stepped into his role as associate producer fresh off a six-month internship with This American Life, where he was involved in all aspects of production, ranging from two-ways to an hour-long investigation, culminating in producing and reporting his own story. At WUSF, Tampa, he reported and produced local spots for Morning Edition and All Things Considered. He has also produced at WWVS in Tallahassee; done production work for Studio 360; and interned at The Daily Show.

Jess Engebretson, associate producer, graduated from Swarthmore in 2009, parlaying her experiences there working for War News Radio and the Sudan Radio Project into a Watson Fellowship. She spent two years researching radio in post-conflict societies—living in Indonesia, Rwanda, and Liberia—also working as a trainer at community radio stations and doing some freelancing for PRI’s The World. After two years abroad, Engebretson landed back in the States and headed to Charlottesville to join the BackStory team.

Anna Pinkert, associate producer, joined the BackStory team after a stint at Radio Boston, a daily regional magazine show out of WBUR. Prior to that, this Wesleyan history major pursued her passion for the subject by developing video, audio, and interactive games for museums. She decided to explore her interest in radio production by attending the Salt Institute for Documentary Studies in Maine, where she produced a feature named by the University of Missouri Review’s 2011 audio contest as Best Professionally Recorded Documentary.

Jamal Millner, technical director, has been a professional musician since he was 14. This UVa. graduate in ethnomusicology traveled the world through his 20s, playing with the likes of B.B. King, Taj Mahal, the Dave Matthews Band, and Corey Harris. Those touring days are now behind him, but the expert ear and engineering/production skills that he developed eventually led him to create an audio production company. As he mixes and masters BackStory episodes, Millner’s compositional strengths contribute to finding an audio texture unique to the program.

Nell Boeschenstein, a Charlottesville native, recently joined BackStory as its part-time assisting producer for research, having previously interned for the show. A 2002 graduate of Dartmouth, where she edited the literary magazine and received a prize from the Academy of American Poets, Boeschenstein is an essayist and former print journalist whose work has appeared in The Believer, The Rumpus, This Recording, and The Morning News. She will receive her MFA in fiction writing from Columbia this June.

Tony Field, senior producer, is a Wesleyan graduate who concentrated in history and is directing the hands-on production work of the team as they engage the intellectual, technical, and operational challenges of producing a weekly, nationally targeted history show. Field previously worked at WNYC as a producer for PRI’s Peabody Award–winning On the Media. He has also worked as an editor, writer, and producer for Radiolab. He has produced for PRI’s Fair Game, Soundportraits Productions, and WBUR News. And he has worked with Curtis Fox Productions as editor of the New Yorker magazine’s “Campaign Trail” podcast series.

Andrew Wyndham, BackStory’s founding executive producer, leads the overall operation, guiding content and coordinating the re-launch—focusing especially on fundraising and promoting the program. The Director of Media Programs at the VFH, he is executive producer of the Virginia radio program With Good Reason and has developed other radio initiatives. A Washington and Lee graduate with an MA in English from UVa., he previously developed and served as project director for the award-winning 2003 Re-Imagining Ireland international conference and festival, including an internationally broadcast video documentary and a book of essays.

“Our way of working is all about process,” says Field. The team has improved its process by working with the new producers and consulting with Graham Griffith—founding executive producer of The Takeaway and founding senior producer for On Point. Wyndham and Field adopted a development schedule that both reflects the future pace of operations and has left space for evaluation and critique. Kerry Donahue is former executive producer at WNYC and former producer of Marketplace Index with David Brancaccio. She is adjunct professor at Columbia University’s Graduate School of Journalism and has assisted in defining the process and coordinating listening groups of public radio program directors from around the country. Former WMU Program Director Steve Martin of SFM Consulting is managing BackStory’s weekly marketing campaign, reaching out to stations near and far. There’s much more to come. The new weekly BackStory launched in May.

VIRGINIA BROADCAST TIMES
(FRIDAY, MAY 11 LAUNCH)

WCVE Richmond
Saturdays at 3:00 PM

Radio IQ Roanoke
Saturdays at 7:00 PM

WHRV Norfolk
Saturdays at 7:30 PM

WMRA Harrisonburg
Sundays at 4:00 PM

WAMU Washington
Sundays at 6:00 AM

(starts July 1)

(starts July 8)

VirginiaHumanities.org
The 18th annual Virginia Festival of the Book was held March 21–25. For the ninth year in a row, the Festival saw more than 20,000 in attendance during the five-day fete. The total audience count for all events held strong at 22,426.

Highlights included former NBA star Jerry West’s revelations of his struggles; thought-provoking luncheon remarks on the legacy of the Civil War by historian Ed Ayers; powerful poetry from Nikki Giovanni, Nikky Finney, and Kwame Alexander; and “Southern Refrains,” a night of story and song featuring Jill McCorkle, Lee Smith, Matraca Berg, and Marshall Chapman.

Rooms filled for the more than 130 adult programs that were free and open to the public. “The people from ‘The People’s Pharmacy’ had to open up a viewing room and show [the program] on a large screen,” said Nancy Damon, Festival Program Director.

It was also another success for its widespread community engagement. More than 70 local organizations—including non-profits, businesses and schools—hosted or participated in the events.

“The Festival seems to be better attended, even though we have fewer programs, and that’s probably because people don’t get overwhelmed with too many offerings,” Damon said. “There were enough that people felt like they could attend a program without trying to juggle which ones to attend. It made it easier to get out.”

To see video highlights from this year’s Festival, visit vabook.org
BY DAVID BEARINGER

“I need to let you know that I’m committing an act of civil disobedience, just by being here today.”

This brief statement by Peter Van Buren, a 23-year Foreign Service officer serving with the U.S. State Department, was one of the most unusual beginnings to any program in the Virginia Festival of the Book’s 18 years. But what followed was, in some ways, even more provocative.

“My employer has forbidden me to speak publicly about my book. But in forbidding me to speak, they’re also forbidding you to listen…”

Van Buren came to this year’s Festival to talk about his recent book, We Meant Well: How I Helped Lose the Battle for the Hearts and Minds of the Iraqi People (2011). He was part of a panel exploring the tensions between isolationism and internationalism in U.S. foreign policy and the history of American engagement in the world.

The three authors who joined in this event spoke from different but complementary perspectives. In his career, Van Buren has been posted in Thailand, Japan, China, and several other countries. Iraq was his most recent assignment abroad; We Meant Well is his first book.

William May, a Senior Fellow at the Institute of Practical Ethics and Public Life at the University of Virginia, has written widely on religion and ethics in public life. Testing the National Covenant: Fears and Appetites in American Politics is his most recent book.

Christopher Nichols, a current post-doctoral fellow at the University of Pennsylvania, was here to talk about his new book, Promise and Peril: America at the Dawn of a Global Age. He has also written a book about secularization in American history entitled Prophesies of Godlessness.

The conversation between these three men ranged broadly and went deep, exploring the architecture of our foreign engagement during what Walter Lippman once called “The American Century” (the 20th century) and beyond. The audience was enthralled. Many people said it was one of the best events of its kind they had attended, in this or any previous Book Festival.

Van Buren described his time in Iraq and what he came to see as a wasted opportunity: wasted in part because our nation-building strategies were in many cases ill-informed, hastily conceived, and rooted in a fundamental belief that American values and the American “way of life” are superior to those that had defined Iraq and its people for millennia.

Bill May sees American foreign policy as, to a significant degree, “driven by runaway fears” and based on a dualistic world view that inspires isolation on the one hand and imperialism on the other. In his view, once the U.S. became the only global superpower following the collapse of the Soviet empire, America had a choice: to approach other nations as “self apart from others”; as “self over others”; or as “first among equals.”

According to May, the U.S. has usually taken one of the first two roads, but almost never the third.

Chris Nichols cited three main factors in the shaping of 20th-century American engagement abroad: humanitarianism, the quest for “collective security,” and technological change. He posed a fundamental question — “What are the costs to society at home of being involved abroad?” — which turned the conversation back to Peter Van Buren and the cost, in hundreds of billions of dollars, of what he sees as our failed attempt and a tragically missed opportunity to rebuild a secure, sustainable society in Iraq.

In the late 1970s, Random House published a book about the last days of American involvement in Vietnam. It was written by a former CIA officer named Frank Snepp, without the CIA’s approval. Snepp had signed an agreement as a condition of his employment, allowing the agency to review anything he wrote prior to publication. The CIA sued to block all distribution of his book, Decent Interval (1977), which Snepp and Random House resisted on free speech grounds, claiming the agreement he had signed was unconstitutional.

The case went quickly to the Supreme Court, which decided in favor of the CIA. Books were ordered removed from store shelves; Snepp was required to turn over profits, past and future, from the sale of Decent Interval to the U.S. Treasury, and forced to submit to the CIA for review anything he would ever write about his professional past, fiction or nonfiction, for the rest of his life.

According to Van Buren, his own contract with the State Department pertains only to the disclosure of classified information and We Meant Well contains no such classified material. His appearance at this year’s Virginia Festival of the Book, therefore, may have been provocative, but it was not illegal; nor did VFH receive any injunction or any request not to include Van Buren. We were not asked to constrain his presentation in any way. And we did not.

Whatever the outcome of Van Buren’s case may be, we’re pleased that he and his two fellow panelists were part of this year’s Book Festival. Discussion of important public issues, through the lens of books and literature, is at the heart of the humanities and one of the central commitments of VFH.
“Hoarders are good people who are struggling with difficult issues. To move toward recovery they need love and help, not ridicule,” wrote Matt Paxton in the foreword of The Secret Life of Hoarders (2011), one of the numerous new releases presented to the attendees of this year’s Virginia Festival of the Book.

Paxton, from Richmond, readily admits he didn’t set out to be an extreme-cleaning specialist. Nor did he expect to become one of the popular experts on the hit A&E television show Hoarders, much less an author or panelist at a book festival.

Nevertheless, the paperback book he co-authored with Phaedra Hise is packed with empathy, advice, and practical steps for cleaning up homes and healing the hoarder.

Hoarding is not unlike anorexia, he told the audience gathered in the Charlottesville City Hall auditorium on Saturday morning: “You have to take ‘lazy’ and ‘crazy’ out of your vocabulary. Hoarders are sick.”

Anyone wanting to help a hoarder needs compassion in order to find what traumas or events may lie behind the compulsion to save, plus the recognition that it takes patience and time to make a permanent change.

“You have to treat the trigger first,” declared Paxton, meaning an emotional disturbance that provokes the behavior. He compared the futility of cleaning a house of clutter without finding the trigger to taking beer out of the fridge in hopes of stopping an alcoholic from drinking.

Acutely aware that television producers walk a fine line when showcasing a mental disorder for entertainment, Paxton has stopped the cameras on occasion to protect clients who weren’t emotionally ready for the upheaval that comes with a clean-up. His company, Clutter Cleaner, works in tandem with therapists, and clients who appear on TV also receive professional help.

He did acknowledge that only Stage 5 hoarders—tops on his scale of one to five—typically make it to the show. His book, however, describes traits that suggest just how easily hoarding can begin.

For example, keeping a big sturdy cup from a fast food restaurant with the intention of donating it to a homeless shelter or repurposing it for a second use is admirable. Allowing other similar plastic items to accumulate creates a problem. Saving old electronic parts in case they might be useful “one day”? Saving newspapers for the crossword puzzles, or magazine articles for a friend? Stocking up on cans of food that go on sale? All these point to a potential for hoarding.

Hoarders-in-training, according to Paxton, simply have difficulty processing the “avalanche of stuff” that is part of our lives as consumers. Consider the following excerpts from Paxton’s own guide to the first three stages:

**STAGE 1**—clutter isn’t excessive, hoarding isn’t always recognizable; storage is about habits more than about volume; for example, not being able to part with things easily.

**STAGE 2**—piles are mounting; junk drawers become junk rooms; residents pay less attention to housekeeping or repairing large broken items.

**STAGE 3**—hoarding becomes evident to the outside world; walkways and stairs are difficult to navigate, outside storage areas overflow; physical activity and finances suffer.

The book also lists resources—web sites, support groups, other books, and even needed supplies for a planned clean-up—that can prove invaluable to those wanting to aid a hoarder.

Still, the author emphasizes that compassion, patience, respect, and hope are even more important. “You’ve got to find the hope to cope,” he told Festival attendees.

Both Paxton and Sandra Beasley, a Washington, D.C., author who wrote about the challenge of growing up with severe food allergies and who was paired with Paxton on the “Memoirs: How We Cope” panel at the Festival, agreed that their books are largely educationally driven, written to help others understand what they have seen first-hand.

Neither affliction—allergies or hoarding—is particularly new, but both play increasingly prominent roles in the 21st century.
ABOLITION IN THE
ANTEBELLUM SOUTH

Moncure Daniel Conway

BY BRENDAN WOLFE

Last year, Richard Cohen penned a provocative piece in the Washington Post asking us to get over Robert E. Lee already. He’s “swaddled in myth, kitsch and racism,” Cohen wrote; a good general fighting for an evil cause. Cohen then asserted that “in that exotic place called the antebellum South, there were plenty of people who recognized the evil of slavery”—except that he didn’t name any! So here’s one: Moncure Daniel Conway.

Born into a prominent Virginia slaveholding family—his father was related to Washington and Madison, his mother to a signer of the Declaration of Independence and a Supreme Court justice—Conway nevertheless rejected much of his upbringing. He rejected Stafford County for Boston; the Episcopal Church for Methodism, then Unitarianism, and finally free thinking; slavery for abolitionism. In July 1854, while attending Harvard, he witnessed the trial of the fugitive slave Anthony Burns, whom Conway claimed to have known in Virginia, and the rioting that followed. He gave a speech declaring that “in Virginia, they not only had slaves, but every man with a conscience, or even the first throbbings of a conscience, is a slave.”

The men in Conway’s family were none too pleased, but his mother and sister encouraged him. In 1861, he anonymously penned a book-length plea for emancipation that was so popular the Union army distributed copies to its soldiers. President Lincoln, too, encouraged Conway, inviting him to challenge the administration publicly. “Don’t spare me,” Conway recalled Lincoln saying. In another pro-emancipation book, published in 1862, Conway did not, often addressing Lincoln directly and arguing that abolition would cripple the Confederacy and hasten peace.

Conway did more than just speak and write, however. Late in July 1862, he led thirty-one of his own father’s slaves, all of whom had escaped to Washington, D.C., on a sometimes-dangerous train ride to Yellow Springs, Ohio. In his 1904 autobiography, Conway remembered the last leg of that trip. It began late in the evening while they were still in slave territory, and the men, women, and children neither slept nor talked. Everyone was on edge.

“At last,” he wrote, “when the name of a certain [train] station was called out, I observed that every eye danced, every tongue was loosened, and, after some singing, they all dropped off to sleep.” Conway wrote that he did not immediately understand the change—that they had crossed into free territory. “How they knew it I cannot divine; it was a small place, but there the shadow of slavery ended.” The newly freed people settled along the Little Miami River, and there founded what came to be known as the Conway Colony.

The historian John d’Entremont has described Conway as “the most thoroughgoing white male radical produced by the antebellum South.”

For more information, see Encyclopedia Virginia’s entries on Moncure Daniel Conway, Anthony Burns, Robert E. Lee, and Robert E. Lee in Memory at EncyclopediaVirginia.org
“Ain’t I a Woman!”
CELEBRATING THE LIVES OF SEVEN AMERICAN WOMEN

BY DAVID BEARINGER

It’s March 27, and the auditorium of Nandua High School in lower Accomack County on Virginia’s Eastern Shore is near-to-overflowing.

We’re here to honor the lives and achievements of three local women who made important contributions in the fields of health care, education, and history. We’re also here for the performance of “Ain’t I a Woman!” by a Florida-based chamber music and theatre group called The Core Ensemble. VFH has provided partial support for the event, through a grant made a few months earlier.

The local women being honored on this warm spring night are Dr. Belle Fears, the first female physician to practice on the Eastern Shore; Mary Nottingham Smith, a lifelong educator who led the effort to create the first high school for African American children on the Shore; and Frances Latimer, a community historian, genealogist, and publisher who worked closely with VFH for more than a decade prior to her death in 2010 (see VFH Views, Spring 2011).

All three of these women broke the ceilings they were born under. Their lives were defined by imagination, hard work, and courage—and by a love for the Shore and its people. And the work they accomplished still reverberates and has the power to inspire others, at home and far beyond. That was made clear in the graceful testaments to their individual legacies which began the program. And also in the performance that followed, honoring four women of national stature.

“Ain’t I a Woman!” is an extraordinary piece of musical theatre—one of several original works produced by The Core Ensemble—featuring jazz, blues, and chamber music by Max Roach, Charles Mingus, Thelonious Monk, Memphis Slim, John Coltrane, Diane Monroe, and others. Its title comes from a speech in 1851 by Sojourner Truth, a former slave who became a powerful voice for black freedom and women’s rights.

Truth is one of the four women whose lives this performance portrays. The others are Clementine Hunter, an artist whose paintings of African American life in the rural South gained international recognition; Zora Neale Hurston, the folklorist, anthropologist, and novelist whose book Their Eyes Were Watching God is widely regarded today as one of the great works of 20th century American literature; and Fannie Lou Hamer, whose work on behalf of voting rights and full political representation for African Americans broke hard new ground in the 1960s, both in her native Mississippi and within the Democratic Party.

The characterizations of these four women, all meticulously researched, brought many in the audience at various times to tears and then to deep, inspired laughter. They stand as brilliant pieces of theatre. They also speak to the formative and transformative impact of women on American history.

Part of the power of this event—taking place in a high school auditorium, before an overflowing audience, white and black, in one of the most rural parts of Virginia—came through the ways it revealed deep similarities among and between the seven women being honored. The same refusal to accept limitations that inspired Sojourner Truth, Clementine Hunter, Zora Neale Hurston, and Fannie Lou Hamer in their work also inspired Frances Latimer, Belle Fears, and Mary Nottingham Smith in theirs.

Almost thirty years ago, VFH played a key role in helping to conceive and launch

FOLKLIFE APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAM

Wins 2011 Helen and Martin Schwartz Prize

The Virginia Folklife Apprenticeship Program earned one of the highest honors offered to humanities programs when the 2011 Helen and Martin Schwartz Prize was awarded to the 10-year-old program in November.

“The Apprenticeship Program is one of the most important and rewarding things we do in the Virginia Folklife Program,” said Jon Lohman, state folklorist and VFH Folklife Program Director. “It helps pass along cherished traditions of Virginia, and has a direct impact on individual artists. We are honored and thrilled to be recognized and bestowed with this prestigious award.”

Virginia Folklife Apprenticeship Program pairs experienced masters with eager apprentices or apprentice teams to help ensure that a particular Virginia folkway is passed on in ways that are conscious of history and faithful to tradition. One judge of the 2011 prize lauded the program as “unique in its apprenticeship approach to the preservation of traditional folkways and arts . . . and clearly a monumental force in the effort to save disappearing art forms.”

The Schwartz Prize, administered by the Federation of State Humanities Councils, is awarded annually to up to three programs for outstanding work in the public humanities. The Schwartz Prize is awarded to councils for innovative programs that have had a significant impact on citizens, organizations, or communities in their states.

Since 2002, the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities’ Folklife Program—the state center for the documentation, presentation, and preservation of Virginia’s rich cultural traditions—has supported year-long apprenticeships in a wide range of traditional folklife. The Apprenticeship Showcase, a public event celebrating the program, has grown into a folklife festival with more than 300 visitors annually. Audio and video recordings of the apprenticeship teams are broadcast on the Folklife YouTube channel and website. In the past five years, the Virginia Folklife Program has reached an estimated audience of 100,000, at concerts, festivals, and workshops and 2.2 million through the media. For more information visit VirginiaHumanities.org.
THE MEANING OF 1619 IN VIRGINIA

The White Lion and the House of Burgesses

BY DAVID BEARINGER

In late August of 1619, a ship called the White Lion, bearing a Dutch marque, landed at Point Comfort on the James River, a few miles downriver from Jamestown.

As John Rolfe later wrote to the Virginia Company, this ship carried “20. and odd Negros” who were sold to the Jamestown colonists in exchange for food.

The Africans had been plundered from a Portuguese slave ship a few weeks earlier off the coast of Mexico by the White Lion working in “consort” with an English vessel named the Treasurer. It’s likely they were Ndongo people who lived in densely populated West African cities, not rural villages. Some of them may have been Christians.

These were not the first Africans in North America, and perhaps not even the first in the English-speaking New World, but their arrival was an important event, nonetheless.

Because slavery had not yet been established in Virginia, their legal status in the colony was ambiguous. But they had been enslaved, and had endured the horrors of the Middle Passage. They did not come to Jamestown by choice.

What happened to these Africans in Virginia is mostly unknown. Were they treated as free men and women? Did they become indentured and later freed? Or were they slaves in all but name?

Four days later, more Africans arrived on the Treasurer, and some of them, too, were sold. Soon the floodgates would open and millions of African and African-descended people would follow these unwilling immigrants to Virginia.

By 1630 the African population of Virginia had increased dramatically, and by the late 1630s, clear distinctions were already being made in Virginia between the status of white servants and black slaves.

Slavery was not codified in Virginia law until decades later; but it’s clear that the arrival of the White Lion in 1619 was, in practical terms, the beginning of African and African American history in the Commonwealth; and that the story of how, when, and why slavery took root in Virginia also begins here.

Just a few weeks before the White Lion dropped anchor off Point Comfort, the Virginia House of Burgesses met for the first time at Jamestown, on July 30. Governor Yeardley presided.

This was not, as is sometimes believed, the first meeting of a representative law-making body in the so-called New World. The Iroquois and other native tribes in North America had representative forms of government long before the English arrived; and in 1619, the House of Burgesses was not a representative body as we understand that term today.

But still, just like the arrival of the “20. and odd” Africans a few weeks later, it was an event of profound importance, and the beginning of a long trajectory, a chain of history. It was the source-spring of what eventually became one of Virginia’s—and America’s—great contributions to the world.

In 2019, Virginia will commemorate these two events: the convening of a representative law-making body and the arrival of a group of Africans at Jamestown.

What is the meaning of these events for us today? How should Virginia observe this anniversary? What questions does it raise for us and how do we begin to frame the answers?

Enslavement and freedom; equality and inequality; the ways we have understood and responded to “racial” difference; and how these have been established, codified, sustained, or overturned in law is one possible approach. There are many others.

Over the next several months the VFH will be considering these questions earnestly, in partnership with other organizations, scholars, and community leaders statewide. Many voices are needed in this conversation, about how best to observe the 1619 anniversary and why it matters to Virginians in the present day.
VFH SAYS FAREWELL TO Exemplary Board Members

June 2012 marks the close of four of our Board Members’ tenures. It is with great gratitude that we honor Cassandra Newby-Alexander, Jo Ann Hofheimer, Maurice Jones, and Rose Nan-Ping Chen for their dedication to VFH and the humanities in Virginia. As Board officers, policy shapers, and stalwart advocates, they defined a commitment to excellence that brought VFH programming through tough times, still shining.

CASSANDRA NEWBY-ALEXANDER is Associate Professor of History at Norfolk State University, where she has taught since 1992. Newby-Alexander earned a BA degree from the University of Virginia and a PhD degree from the College of William and Mary. She serves on numerous boards including the Historical Commission of the Supreme Court of Virginia, the Norfolk Sister City Association, and the African American-Jewish Coalition. Newby-Alexander lives in Chesapeake and has directed or co-directed nine VFH-funded grants.

JO ANN M. HOFHEIMER, VFH Board Vice-Chair, is an author, freelance writer, and master gardener. She earned BS and MA degrees from Old Dominion University. She is a member of the board of the WHRO Foundation, a mentor at Seatack Elementary School, and former President of the Irene Leache Memorial Foundation at the Chrysler Museum of Art. Hofheimer was on the board of the Virginia Center for the Book before it relocated to VFH.

MAURICE A. JONES, VFH Board Chair, is President and Publisher of The Virginian-Pilot, Chair of the Hampton Roads Chamber of Commerce, and Rector of the Eastern Virginia Medical School. Jones graduated with a BA from Hampden-Sydney College, was a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford University, and received his JD from the U.Va. School of Law. Jones was confirmed in March 2012 by the U.S. Senate to the position of Deputy Secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

ROSE NAN-PING CHEN was born and raised in Taiwan. She has served on numerous boards including The Arts Council of Richmond, Communities in Schools and Friends of Comboni Missionary Sisters, Ikebana of Richmond, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts’ Multicultural Advisory Council, and was an advisory panelist for the Virginia Commission for the Arts. As President of the Rose Group for Cross-Cultural Understanding, she was instrumental in a 2006 VFH cultural exchange between Virginia and China.

DONOR PROFILE

Barbara Fried

The humanities in general and the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities (VFH) in particular have found a wonderful champion in Barbara Fried, one of the organization’s largest supporters over the past decade.

Born and raised in Brooklyn where there was an excellent public school system, Barbara remembers one of the guiding forces of her interest in humanities was an incomprehensible algebra teacher.

The first in her family to graduate from college, Barbara earned first her bachelor’s degree and then her JD from the University of Chicago, followed by an MA in history from U.Va., where she is pursuing a PhD in history now. Why history? “Because of how it informs the present,” she says.

With her great passion for books, Barbara remembers reading voraciously as a child, “devouring anything I could get my hands on because it opened up so many different worlds.” She is currently, not surprisingly, in the middle of reading three memoirs, and The Short History of Nearly Everything by Bill Bryson and Revelations by Elaine Pagels, whose program she recently saw at the Virginia Festival of the Book.

In 2002, Barbara was introduced to VFH through her involvement with the preservation efforts for the Laurel Grove School, one of the few remaining African American school buildings in northern Virginia. An association of friends and alumni were converting it into a museum and interpretive center, supported in part by a VFH grant. Subsequently asked by Virginia Governor Mark Warner to serve on the VFH Board of Directors, she was excited to jump in feet first.

A passionate advocate of education, she credits Encyclopedia Virginia (EV) at VFH with helping to fill the learning gap for children in school today, particularly in history and civics.

“There seems to be a disconnect about what kids know about their own state,” according to Barbara. “EV is a wonderful way of getting the information to its audience—free—and works on a modern interactive level.” She praises the digital resource for its accessibility, accuracy, and scholarly approach in reaching its audiences. “EV is reaching out and engaging people. Students, teachers, but also adults moving to this country from all over the world, need to be on the same page with their children about the history of their new home.” She imagines EV as integrated into every level of learning in Virginia, including those studying for citizenship.

A Crozet resident, Barbara finds her involvement with VFH invigorating, as it allows her to be with caring and thinking people on a regular basis. She invests in the EV project and also feels it’s crucial to support the Annual Fund because “you can’t ask others to give to something not worthy of your own contributions, especially when you are on the Board for that organization.”

Currently serving her second term with VFH, she also serves on the Board of the U.Va. Foundation, is an Emeritus member of the George Mason University Foundation Board, and recently served as chair of the Sorenson Institute for Political Leadership. Barbara is also board chairman at Innisfree Village, a voluntary community for adults with mental disabilities dedicated to providing a sharing home and work environment.

Her commitment to making our greater community a better place is nothing short of extraordinary.
VFH Fellow Makes The Daily Show

BY ELIZABETH DOWLING TAYLOR

Being the guest on The Daily Show the day after my first book was released was a lucky break, a terrifying prospect, and, as it actually unfolded, a terrific experience.

I had no inside line to the show and neither did my Palgrave Macmillan publicist. She had simply cast a wide net in “pitching” my book to the sea of media possibilities and pulled in a big one. Booked for January 4, I got the news two weeks before. That gave me plenty of time to get nervous. I watched clips of Jon Stewart’s earlier interviews with authors on the show’s website, and let my family know of my pending fifteen minutes of fame. My mother had never heard of The Daily Show and it didn’t help when I told her it was on Comedy Central—she and her friends were waiting for Oprah to take notice of my book. My son Luke on the other hand, squarely within the show’s coveted demographic and at home over college winter break, was duly impressed and jumped at the opportunity to travel to New York with me and meet Jon Stewart.

January 4 finally arrived. Luke and I took the train up to Manhattan and checked into a hotel near the Flatiron Building, home to the Macmillan group of publishers. A Daily Show producer and I discussed the book’s themes by telephone that afternoon. With that conversation having gone so smoothly, I gained a grip on my nerves: I would rise to the occasion. Soon thereafter, Luke and I met my publicist, editor, and literary agent in the hotel lobby (“Mom,” my son whispered, “You have people”) and we all jumped into the car The Daily Show had sent to transport us to the studio on the far west side where the show is taped.

There was my name on the green room door (the day before it was Charles Barkley and the day after George Lucas). The producer came in to say that she had not yet had a chance to talk with Jon about our earlier discussion and anyway, whatever she might share with him, he would do his own thing. A little later Jon themselves came in and we conversed directly. It was obvious to me that he was going to highlight the contradiction inherent in the Father of the Constitution owning slaves. I had little opportunity to formulate a strategy because it was now time for the show’s taping. We watched on a screen in the green room until the guest segment came up. This is it. Mic checked. Name announced. This is really it.

Stewart did, indeed, go right for the hypocrisy angle, but he was never ornery and I rolled with it as best I could. I readily agreed that Madison was a man of contradictions when it came to slavery (or flip-flopped as he put it) but he pressed on. Stewart charged that the explanation that slave-owning Founding Fathers like Madison were “complicated men” was “an excuse” for their moral cowardice in this area. I countered that in writing my particular book, the objective was neither to defend nor denounce Madison but to tell Paul Jennings’s story. My host, with his well-honed comic timing, paused for a couple of seconds and then said, “Yeah…that’s not gonna fly here.” I just had to laugh. The truth is I agreed with Stewart’s assessment and I was out of come backs. Happily, he went on to ask other questions that allowed me to elaborate on Paul Jennings’s one-of-a-kind journey from slavery to freedom and his later authorship of the first White House memoir.

Interview concluded, the studio audience was clapping heartily; I turned their way, gave a big wave, and exited the set. Thus ended my proverbial fifteen minutes. Well, not quite fifteen but a glorious six minutes, 45 seconds.

“Get it,” Stewart directed his television audience of 2.3 million as he held up my book. He had even mentioned that magical word “movie” during the segment, twice. Sales did in fact soar—two days later A Slave in the White House was the 73rd best-selling book published in early 2012.
More Than Just a Pretty Face

In January, VFH launched a new website with a completely revamped look and feel. It’s way more than just a face-lift though. The new website features content from across all our programs, events from around the state, and snippets of news all in one place.

You can find all this under a new web address: VirginiaHumanities.org

While you’re there, click “Subscribe to Our Newsletter” in the top right corner to get timely updates about VFH activities all across the Commonwealth.

September 21-22 Conference at Norfolk State University
“1619: Repositioning Our Collective Memory”

In September, Norfolk State University, in partnership with VFH, will sponsor a two-day conference that explores the legacy and current meaning of a watershed moment in Virginia’s history: the arrival of a group of Africans at Jamestown and the first meeting of the Virginia House of Burgesses. See related article on page 9.

What is the present-day significance of these two events, which took place only four weeks apart in 1619? What was created or set in motion by the coming together of Native American, European, and African cultures in Virginia?

Further information on the conference can be found at www.nsu.edu/1619, or contact Cassandra Newby-Alexander, NSU Professor of History and Conference Chair, at clnewby-alexander@nsu.edu.