The Western Tidewater region is shaped like an irregular pentagon, and the James, which widens steadily as it flows east from Claremont in Surry County to the I-664 bridge, is its northern rim. Moving downriver, you pass the former Chippokes Plantation, now a state park, Bacon’s Castle, the town of Smithfield a few miles inland, and finally Chuckatuck Creek and the Nansemond River, a still largely undeveloped waterway connecting downtown Suffolk to the James.

Three small historic villages—Crittenden, Eclipse, and Hobson, each with its own traditions of farming, fishing, and boat building—rest unsteadily on the cusp of redevelopment, at the tip of a narrow peninsula looking out across the James River at its widest point, over to the shipyards at Newport News. The view is loveliest at night.

John Smith explored the Nansemond and surrounding waterways on his second voyage in 1608. Later, during the so-called “starving time,” a quick series of violent encounters between the English settlers and the Nansemond Indians took place on Dumpling Island, out in the river, where the Indians stored their corn and buried their chiefs. Lives were lost on both sides, and the incident soured relations and set the stage for deeper, bloodier conflicts to come.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2
Suffolk is the largest city in Virginia geographically and by far the most rural. It’s been a center of commerce and trade since 1712 when John Constant built a tobacco rolling house at “Constant’s Wharf,” and later, a warehouse for tobacco, grain, and salt.

Constant’s Wharf was re-named “Suffolk Town” in 1742, and in 1974 the town of Suffolk merged with Nansemond County, turning what had been a tightly knit small town into a sprawling independent city, much of it actively farmed, even today.

The eastern border separating Suffolk and the City of Chesapeake is straight as a surveyor’s iron. It cuts through the Great Dismal Swamp, now a 111,000-acre preserve stretching into North Carolina.

The Swamp has its own deep history, hidden sometimes under layers of mythology, like leaffall—tales of lost communities, fugitive slaves, and get-rich development schemes run aground.

George Washington hoped to drain the swamp, harvest the lumber, and convert the land to farming, and he was a partner in two investment syndicates formed for this purpose. The logging operation was successful, but the larger effort failed. Washington himself directed the surveying and digging of a five-mile-long canal from the western edge of the Swamp to Lake Drummond. The canal is known today as “Washington Ditch.”

Improbable that such a vast expanse of undeveloped land would lie within the borders of Virginia’s largest expanse of city, Suffolk. But this is just one of the many ironies and surprises of this complex region.

Turning back toward western Suffolk, then up into Southampton and Sussex Counties, across the border into Isle of Wight, you’re in peanut country. Other crops are grown here—cotton, field corn, soybeans, wheat, even mushrooms—but the peanut, especially the large, high-value “Virginia peanut,” is king.

Beginning in the late 19th century and continuing up to the present day, peanuts have shaped every part of life in the Western Tidewater region. This is true especially in Suffolk, which has been the center of peanut processing and marketing since the 1880s, and in Southampton County, which is the undisputed heart of peanut farming country in Virginia today.

There are nearly 200 “Century Farms” in Western Tidewater (farms in continuous operation by the same family for 100 years or more), eighty-five in Southampton County alone; and much of this land is devoted to growing peanuts, which are ideally suited to the sandy loam soils in the region.

Peanuts remain the most reliably profitable crop, even for smaller-scale producers. But the same pressures that are changing agriculture and farm life throughout the U.S. are also changing the farm-related economy and culture of Western Tidewater.

China and Brazil are now dominating the global peanut markets, profit margins are thin and growing thinner, the pressures are toward consolidation and large-scale production, and one bad growing season can put even a solid family-run farm business in jeopardy.

In Western Tidewater, the connections between the land and human history are visible everywhere, and sometimes in surprising ways.

For example, Courtland is home to the Southampton Agriculture and Forestry Museum and Heritage Village, which includes one of the finest farm-related museum collections in the state, as well as a restored grist mill, saw mill, one room school building, ice and smoke houses, and other artifacts of the region’s rural heritage.

It’s also the interpretive hub of the recently designated Nat Turner Heritage Area, which is part of a larger effort to create balanced educational programs focusing on the history of the insurrection and its meaning in Virginia and American history.
To preserve and interpret the history, one could argue that it’s necessary to preserve the surrounding land, much of which appears essentially as it did when Turner launched his raid on the night of August 21, 1831.

Only two buildings directly connected to the history of the insurrection survive. One of these, the Rebecca Vaughan House, has been moved from its original site onto a tract near the Museum and is being restored.

The challenge is how to present the history of a bloody incident, inseparable from the most difficult questions about the history of human slavery in America, in a way that acknowledges and heals old wounds without reopening them.

As it happens, Southampton County was the home not just of Nat Turner, but also of two other important figures who resisted slavery in very different ways.

Dred Scott challenged slavery through the courts. Anthony Gardiner emigrated to Liberia under the sponsorship of the American Colonization Society. He served as Liberia’s first Attorney General and its ninth President.

Interpreting the lives and separate destinies of these three men, all of them directly connected to Southampton County, is part of a broader effort by the county’s Historical Society and others to promote heritage tourism and a more complete story of human slavery in America, in a way that acknowledges old wounds without reopening them.

Jeff Turner, local hero and a founding member of the Regional Council. Jeff started the first Riverkeeper Program in Virginia, as a way of expressing his own love for the Nottoway and the Blackwater. A community historian of the first rank, by any standard you could apply.

Jeff’s pontoon boat is like a floating classroom; and there’s no other word for his knowledge of these rivers but “profound.” Unless it would be “irreplaceable.”

**WHARF HILL IN SMITHFIELD.** The center of business life and entertainment for African Americans in Isle of Wight County in the decades prior to integration. A long, slow decline, then pressure to redevelop and rebuild under new ownerships.

But it’s no longer the same. James Thomas, journalist and Council member, is working to document what he can, so the old Wharf Hill will be remembered, not forgotten.

**THE NATIVE PRESENCE.** Three of Virginia’s state-recognized Indian tribes have their ancestral lands in Western Tidewater; the Nansemond in what is now Suffolk; the Cheroenhaka Nottoway and the Nottoway of Virginia tribes in Southampton. Their influence, once very strong, is strong again. And growing.

**REMARKABLE TREES.** Ancient stands of baldcypress along the Blackwater River and the shores of Lake Drummond in the Dismal Swamp. Atlantic White Cedars. Water Tupelos. Overcup and Sand-Post Oaks.
EXPLORING Western Tidewater  
CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

Cypress Bridge, the “Lost Forest,” re-discovered and now protected thanks to the efforts of Byron Carmean, another founding member of the Council.

Within this 300-acre enclave are nine-foot cypress “knees,” more than a dozen “champion trees,” the largest of their kind; and, the largest of them all is the “Big Mama” cypress. Some experts think she may be 2,000 years old, possibly more. Or may have been, because she died soon after she was discovered.

ANCIENT SITES. Cactus Hill in Sussex County, which proved conclusively that there were human beings in what is now Virginia more than twelve thousand years ago. Every year for generations, new artifacts—banner stones, axe heads, spear and arrow points—would come up out of the fields. Horse-drawn plows left these intact.

Heavy equipment breaks them to pieces.

HAMS. Hogs once foraged through the fields and woodlands in much of Western Tidewater. Today, at Darden’s Country Store, Tom and DeeDee Darden smoke 900 hams a year, using more or less the same techniques that people in Isle of Wight County would have used in 1780.

The difference is that it’s 2013, and the “market” for Darden hams extends throughout the U.S. and even beyond.

WIDE EXPANSES AND ENDANGERED SPECIES. The Big Woods and Joseph Pines Preserves in Suffolk, more than 3,000 acres total. The Blackwater Ecological Preserve near Zuni. Hog Island Wildlife Refuge in Surry. The Dismal Swamp.

THE VIRGINIA-NATIVE LONG LEAF PINE. The Yellow Pitcher Plant. The Atlantic White Cedar. The Golden Puccoon. These, too, are links to the past. The Long Leaf Pines went for ship masts, tar and pitch. Cedars were cut for roof-shingles. Feral hogs rooted up the pine seedlings to get at the tarry roots underneath, making the Long Leaf rare where it had once been plentiful.

PRESTERVATION. The Sebrell Historic District in Southampton. The downtown renaissance in Boykins. Boykins is about as close to North Carolina as you can get without being inside. Brett and Phyllis Bunch, Council members, are at the heart of what’s happening there, building on the history, looking ahead.


Benjamin Hicks, an African American from Southampton County, invented a gasoline-powered machine for stemming and cleaning peanuts. The picker he invented helped to modernize peanut farming, and he successfully defended his patent for the device in court.

PEANUTS AND FOLK ART. The Miles B. Carpenter Folk Art and Peanut Museum in Waverley. Carpenter’s work, strange from one perspective, highly respected from another, is found in national collections of folk and “outsider” art. He was once invited to the White House to meet President Reagan. Shirley Yancey, a founding member of the Regional Council, also founded the Museum.

THE OBICI HOUSE AND PLANTERS CLUB IN SUFFOLK. Built by an Italian immigrant named Amedeo Obici, who founded Planters Peanuts, developed it into the largest peanut empire in the world, created a charitable foundation with the profits, and along the way produced one of the most iconic symbols in American business history—the dapper Mr. Peanut.


Felice Hancock, the Council’s founding chair, and her husband Bill Hancock, a Southampton native. Both solid local historians in their own right. We couldn’t have begun our work in Western Tidewater, much less brought it to this point, without them.

Every place, every region in Virginia has its own layers waiting to be peeled back, its own stewards of the history of that place, the doers, the people who are living links between the past and whatever comes next.

But all this is especially true in Western Tidewater, partly because the incursions of development have so far been relatively small, and few, and far between. There’s still not much that separates a visitor today from the dreams of George Washington, the footsteps of Nat Turner, the smell of peanuts drying in the field, or a Nottoway Indian family walking through the forest at Cypress Bridge, before the English settlers arrived.

In Western Tidewater, history is a living thing; which is not to say the region is still living in the past. It’s changing. Very fast in some places.

The VFH is working here, as we are and have been and will be working across Virginia, wherever and however we can, to make the picture more complete; to make the links between the past, the present, and the future easier to see; and to use the tools of the humanities, local knowledge, local organizations, local energy, and the resources of our own programs to enrich the fabric of the Commonwealth.

The Western Tidewater Regional Council is our vital, indispensable partner in this work.
Stepping into Myth

BY BRENDA WOLFE

One of the most persistent legends surrounding the Battle of Gettysburg, which took place 150 years ago, is that it was fought over shoes.

After the battle, Confederate general Henry Heth, a Virginian whose troops were the first to engage on July 1, reported on why he had sent a portion of his division into the small Pennsylvania town. “On the morning of June 30,” Heth wrote, “I ordered Brigadier General [Johnston] Pettigrew to take his brigade to Gettysburg, search the town for army supplies (shoes especially), and return the same day.” That parenthetical phrase “shoes especially” has taken on a life of its own over the years, slipping into myth.

So what are the real reasons for the battle? No question, Union and Confederate armies collided unexpectedly at Gettysburg. And yes, Heth’s men were short on shoes. A rumor had even been circulating that shoes were to be found in Gettysburg. But there was no shoe warehouse or factory in town. Shoes, in fact, were only part of the reason that Heth’s men, in his own words, “stumbled into this fight.”

After Pettigrew encountered Union troopers on June 30, Confederate general A. P. Hill sent Heth to Gettysburg the next day to reconnoiter. His mission: to find out whether the soldiers in town were harmless home guard troops or the more fearsome Army of the Potomac. Heth was not supposed to start a battle; in fact, he was under specific orders from Robert E. Lee not to do so. The Virginian started one anyway.

Nothing about war is simple, of course, and in the same way that Heth stumbled into battle, one can also stumble into a fierce historical argument. Heth’s decisions were angrily debated by Lost Cause historians after the war, part of a larger, often very personal battle over who was to blame for Gettysburg. John S. Mosby wrote in 1908 that Heth and Hill were not interested in shoes at all, but in battle, glory, and prisoners. “If Hill and Heth had stood still,” Mosby wrote, “they would not have stumbled.”

Why, then, the focus on shoes? For some early historians, it may have been a way of distracting readers from more prickly questions surrounding the Confederate defeat. Besides that, the sometimes exaggerated image of shoeless soldiers conveniently underscored the Lost Cause notion of nobility achieved through suffering. By calling attention to the ragged state of Johnny Reb, these writers also called attention to how the underfed, underequipped Confederate army had still managed to triumph in battle. This couldn’t last forever, of course; Gettysburg was proof of that. And while no one argued that Lee lost the battle because his men did not have enough shoes, the image of a shoeless soldier speaks for itself.

Finally, from a literary standpoint, the phrase “shoes especially” represents the perfect detail, quickly translating abstract historical forces into blisters on aching feet and the smell of new shoe leather. Gettysburg readily lends itself to being read as a three-act tragedy, dominated, as many have argued, by Lee’s hubris. That it started by accident, over something so “pedestrian” as shoes, is too perfect for writers to ignore. Shelby Foote certainly did not, crafting a scene in The Civil War: A Narrative (1963) in which A. P. Hill airily dismissed the possibility that the Army of the Potomac was in Gettysburg.

In Foote’s dialogue, Heth was quick to take him up on that. “If there is no objection,” he said, “I will take my division tomorrow and go to Gettysburg and get those shoes.” “None in the world,” Hill responded.

For more information about the Battle of Gettysburg, see EncyclopediaVirginia.org/Gettysburg_Campaign

VirginiaHumanities.org
BOOK FESTIVAL: COOL ON ALL FRONTS

BY KEVIN MCFADDEN

It may have been the coldest Virginia Festival of the Book in its nineteen-year history: March 20-24, 2013, was unreasonably chilly and ended with a bit of a blizzard. Perfect book weather, really...all you wanted to do was stay inside, listen, or read.

The celebrated March event came in with a liftoff and went out with two lions. Betty Shotton’s Leadership Breakfast (featuring Liftoff Leadership) began the Festival Wednesday and on Saturday the Paramount Theater was packed for the first meeting of two iconic figures in the American Civil Rights struggle, Olympic medalist John Carlos and the Honorable John Lewis (D-GA).

Also scoring high with attendees was a panel of seasoned sports writers including John Grisham, Frank Deford, Jane Leavy, Dave Zirin, and Tim Wendel. Hurricane Katrina met its match in Thursday’s luncheon speaker Douglas Brinkley (he wrote a book about it), as did forces of nature like Theodore Roosevelt and Walter Cronkite (two subjects of his recent biographies).

Fiction was in Thursday evening’s forecast; novelists Jill McCorkle, Chris Tilghman, Randy Susan Meyers, and Susan Shreve poured it on. Eben Alexander, the neurosurgeon whose near-death-experience gave him a new perspective on the afterlife, was deluged with interest in Proof of Heaven.

Friday came with a cool front of thriller writers: C.J. Box, David Morrell, Rita Mae Brown, Hank Phillippi Ryan, and Ellen Crosby. And Saturday’s daytime high was set by Natasha Trethewey, U.S. Poet Laureate reading from her new collection, Thrall.

May the great if unpredictable book weather hold for the 20th Anniversary Festival: March 19-23, 2014. See you there!

For audio and video from the Festival, visit vabook.org
BOOK FESTIVAL AUTHOR CONFRONTS HUMAN TRAFFICKING

BY KELLEY LIBBY

Most of us learned in history class that slavery in the U.S. ended with the Thirteenth Amendment. But the trade in human beings—for sex and labor—is actually the fastest growing criminal industry in the world today, and it’s happening just below the surface of our everyday lives. One author on the lineup of this year’s Virginia Festival of the Book called attention to the injustices of modern-day slavery.

Corban Addison is the author of A Walk Across the Sun. He’s also a lawyer. Standing before an audience of festival attendees at the University of Virginia Law School, he chose not to read selections from his book but to instead address the issue at the book’s core.

“The reality, sadly, is that the average age of entry into prostitution in the U.S. is 13 to 15,” Addison said, and the numbers are astounding. According to experts, profits in the international trade of human beings are estimated to reach nearly $91 billion. The profit margins, he said, far exceed the most profitable companies in the world, including Apple and Google. There are an estimated 21 to 27 million slaves in the world. Two million are children who are exploited in the commercial sex trade.

“And when you’re confronted with this—the numbers of people involved,” said Addison, “it just doesn’t seem possible that we could find a way out of it.”

A Walk Across the Sun tells the story of two teenaged sisters in India, whose lives are upended when a tsunami strikes their coastal town and leaves them homeless and orphaned. On their way to seek shelter, they are abducted and sold to a Mumbai brothel. Their survival depends on a rescue, but ruthless criminals stand in the way.

In researching the book, Addison spent a month with a team from International Justice Mission (IJM), a human rights organization that rescues victims of slavery and sexual exploitation. He learned what drives the entire trade is money—demand for commercial sex.

“It comes from average clients,” he said. From guys who “look surprisingly and uncomfortably like me. And my dad. And my neighbor. And my pastor. And my friends.”

Addison said he believes sex trafficking can be defeated.

“Will we ever dry out prostitution entirely?” he asked. “Probably not. But can we make a seismic impact? I believe so. But it’s going to require, as history tells us, a massive effort, a social effort, a cultural effort that involves all of us, and not just the experts.”

PROSPERITY AND THE UPSIDE TO GLOBAL KNOCKOFFS

BY JEANNE NICHOLSON SILER

The core trend of our current historical moment is an optimistic one, full of increasing prosperity and creativity, according to two young authors in the 19th annual Virginia Festival of the Book.

Hailing from the University of Virginia School of Law and the George Mason University School of Public Policy, professors Chris Sprigman and Phil Auerswald took turns sharing their research about our collective future. Their panel provided an attentive audience a peek into their combined research on entrepreneurship, innovation, and creativity.

Sprigman co-authored The Knockoff Economy, How Imitation Sparks Innovation with UCLA law professor Kal Raustiala. With a home in Charlottesville and a position at UVA, Sprigman begins his book, appropriately, with a Thomas Jefferson quote:

[An idea’s] peculiar character… is that no one possesses the less, because every other possesses the whole of it. He who receives an idea from me, receives instruction himself without lessening mine; as he who lights his taper at mine, receives light without darkening me. (1813)

Auerswald, author of The Coming Prosperity, How Entrepreneurs are Transforming the Global Economy, notes the same quotation underscores how our future economy will benefit from the three billion people worldwide who no longer depend on subsistence living: “They will join the global economy in the next quarter century as partners rather than competitors.”

Instead of functioning on economies of scale, the world’s future, he says, will be shaped “around economies of collaboration.” Both men believe doomsday forecasters concerned about resource scarcities overlook today’s tremendous possibilities for improvement. Auerswald suggests entrepreneurs can affect more change than the UN or World Bank.

In The Knockoff Economy, Sprigman stresses that copying both co-exists with and drives creativity. He writes about fashion, food, comedy, and why we can copy recipes and high fashion, and tell other people’s jokes, all without breaking any laws. He notes choreography can be legally protected, but not football plays.

While the music recording industry may have suffered under recent advances in legal and illegal downloading, consumers and musicians now experience the opposite. “It is not farfetched to say that music, in the midst of its alleged decline, is more creative than ever,” writes Sprigman.

Neither of the writers had met before the Festival, but left swapping promises to stay in touch, and offering up compliments to festival organizers who thought to bring them together.
CROSSING OVER: 

The Charlie McClendon Story

BY JON LOHMAN

It’s a Saturday night in 1963 at the Longshoremen’s Hall, and the joint is jumpin’—as are the countless other black music clubs that dot Church Street, the cultural and financial heart of African American Norfolk. Charlie McClendon and his band the Magnificents have just torn through a blistering set of rhythm and blues standards made popular by national acts like Otis Redding, James Brown, and Booker T. and the MGs. As the crowd—moments earlier screaming and pressed against the front of the stage—retreats to get a drink and some fresh air, Charlie closes his eyes, wipes the sweat off his forehead, and leans his six-foot frame back from his Hammond B-3 organ.


“I can get you more money than you’re getting now,” Richard continues. Charlie’s chuckling now, but the kid isn’t fazed. “Charlie McClendon,” the kid says, pausing for dramatic effect, “I’m gonna’ make you a star!”

Sitting together fifty years later in the small house where Charlie has lived and operated a home recording studio since returning from service in the Korean War, Charlie, now 85, and Richard remain close friends, since that first night at Longshoremen’s Hall. They relish the memory of their humorous encounter, and count their blessings that Richard had the guts to show up and approach Charlie and that Charlie was kind and open-minded enough to listen to him.

Richard never made Charlie “a star” on the order of other Hampton Roads musical standouts like jazz greats Pearl Bailey or Ella Fitzgerald, or even those like Gary U.S. Bonds or Gene Barge, who gained a measure of fame as part of Frank Guida’s “Norfolk Sound.” But in partnership with Richard, as well as Norfolk brothers Tom and Steve Herman, Charlie and his band recorded a number of wildly popular local hit records. Together these young men were successful pioneers in the profound musical and cultural phenomenon taking place not only in Norfolk, but also in highly localized urban and rural communities throughout the country, which came to be known as “crossing over.”

In most respects, Norfolk was a deeply segregated city in the 1960s. Though the Norfolk schools officially integrated by the end of the 1950s, 90 percent of all schools remained either all white or all black by the end of the 1960s. The city’s neighborhoods were decidedly either black or white. Yet two vehicles that seemed ahead of the curve towards integration were the city’s jukeboxes and radio dials. Throngs of Hampton Roads’ white youth were venturing away from their own familiar stations to those that played R & B, like Norfolk’s WRAP. Biracial bands, such as Booker T. and the MGs, were embraced by blacks and whites alike. Although just a teenager, Richard knew this dynamic provided a golden opportunity:

I knew they were going to love Charlie. I mean there wasn’t anything not to love. Here’s this guy, coming from the most humble beginnings you could imagine and completely self-taught, and he was absolutely killer. And you have to remember, the white kids were already listening to this music. They just couldn’t get to it. And Charlie was already huge in the black community, but white kids had no idea who he was, which was totally insane. But if you didn’t have a record at that time, then they just wouldn’t hear you, ’cause they just didn’t have access to these bands live. So we saw ourselves as a kind of bridge. It was a no-brainer.
Charlie McClendon in his home studio with the original reel-to-reel recording of “Rainy Night in Georgia.”

PHOTO BY PAT JARRETT.

CROSSING OVER:
The Charlie McClendon Story

Charlie accepted an offer that required very little risk. Charlie would continue to book his regular schedule, with Levin and his friend Tom Herman booking any additional shows targeted to white audiences. Soon Richard and Tom booked Charlie at the popular Nansemond Beachside Resort hotel in Ocean View. The audience response was nothing short of ecstatic. The producers booked Charlie at high school dances, debutante balls, college fraternity parties, and makeshift Virginia Beach dancehalls that catered to young crowds, including the Peppermint Lounge and the Club Top Hat.

Many of the fraternity gigs, as well as those at the Peppermint and Club Top Hat, were raucous affairs. Charlie remembers playing a U.Va. fraternity house when a young couple drove a motorcycle into the house, up the stairs, and on to the stage. The two were completely naked. At the Peppermint, the band was instructed to avoid even the shortest breaks between songs so that fights wouldn’t break out, and at times the shows were raided (because they provided competition to another venue owned by a local public official).

In addition to booking the Magnificents for their own shows, Richard and Tom booked them to back up larger national acts that Richard was presenting in the area. At the time, it was customary for many popular soul and R & B singers to travel without a band. It was the responsibility of the show’s producer to provide one. Charlie found himself playing for the likes of Otis Redding, Solomon Burke, and many others, usually without a single rehearsal. Eventually, Richard and Tom, along with Tom’s older brother Steve, recorded Charlie and several other regional artists on their own startup label, L-Rev Records. Charlie recorded several L-Rev singles that were local hits, including lively renditions of Sam Cooke’s “Put Me Down Easy” and Arthur Alexander’s “We’re Gonna Hate Ourselves in the Morning.”

Charlie had gained a great amount of local popularity and plenty of work, but his R & B career ended in a flash—literally. After a late performance, he invited his friend Gene Williams, who sang for the Platters, to his house to hear a recording he had just made of “Rainy Night in Georgia.” As he played the tape, lightening struck the house, blowing out the power and throwing Charlie and Gene across the room. Charlie made his way through the darkness and stopped at the door to his room to see that the suit that he had worn on the stage that night, which he had draped over a chair, was on fire.

“I said to myself, the Lord’s trying to tell me something,” Charlie remembers, “so that’s when I started looking for a church.” Charlie found one in the Goodwill Baptist Church in Hampton, Virginia, where he has served as musical director for over 28 years. He hasn’t sung R & B publicly ever since.

With generous support from L-Rev founder Steve Herman, the Virginia Folklife Program is documenting the remarkable stories of Charlie and others involved in this seminal period of music in Hampton Roads. We have created an online exhibit of Charlie’s life and work, including recent and archival video, audio, and still photography, and conducted extensive interviews with Charlie McClendon, Richard Levin, and others. To view this material, please visit our online exhibit at VirginiaFolklife.org/McClendon.
THE GRIOT APPRENTICESHIP

HISTORIC PRESERVATION REDEFINED

BY LEONDRA BURCHALL

"WHEN STORIES ARE NOT SHARED, WE LOSE THE RHYTHMS OF OUR PAST AND OUR SENSE OF PLACE AND CONNECTION TO THE COMMUNITIES THAT FORM OUR PRESENT.” —The Public Historian, November 2012

Historic preservation is often identified with tangible objects like buildings or documents. This limited, largely Western view is not shared by many African, Eastern, and indigenous populations throughout the world who value intangibles. Each group, community, locale, or tribe creates a sense of place on its own terms. For centuries these populations have transferred and preserved invaluable records and other links to the past through their oral traditions.

This intergenerational sharing goes beyond our limited understanding of oral tradition. Oral history, strictly defined, is a small part of a much larger set of oral traditions. Oral history, while often the sole source of local knowledge. When the person who carries this knowledge dies, these larger cultural understandings are lost.

The Griot Apprenticeship Program, newly established at VFH in February this year, seeks to honor and preserve what is most important to Virginia’s African American communities. The term ‘griot’ (pronounced gree-oh) is used within the African diaspora to describe the human repository who retains, protects, and shares the community’s stories and values.

Griots exist in every community. As a historian I’ve often received urgent requests to capture and preserve the stories of these griots, elders who, in the words of their fellow community members, “have such a wealth of knowledge.” Fortunately, beginning in the late 1970s, many academic and community scholars began to address this issue through formal oral history projects and programs. As a former director of oral history I realized that conducting only random or systematic interviews was insufficient.

When I joined the VFH staff in the fall of 2011, I began to expand and create new African American programming at the VFH. For the first time I had an opportunity to consider and contemplate how I could address this ongoing challenge within the African American community. As director, I had the time, ability, and institutional support to make a difference. My ideal was a program that both preserved community history and engaged the public in the discourse. I also wanted to establish a structure and format for knowledge-transfer, continuity, sustainability, and intergenerational exchange.

As I noted in an article that appeared in the November 2012 issue of The Public Historian, “good historical work and insight occur when people in the present ask questions of the past in a way that includes broad portions of the community as participants in the ongoing dialogue.”

The Griot Apprenticeship unites the community historian or tradition bearer with a local apprentice, academic historian, and one or more students for a twelve-month period. We launched the program in two regions (north and central) with seven individuals and two neighborhoods: Tinner Hill, located in Falls Church, and Richmond’s Jackson Ward.

Edwin Henderson, founder and president of the Tinner Hill Heritage Foundation, a nonprofit that promotes awareness of Northern Virginia’s African American history and its civil rights pioneers, is the Falls Church griot. The apprentice is Alyssa Walker, a teacher with the Fairfax County Office for Children; the team scholar is Dr. Spencer Crew, professor of public history at George Mason University. Elvatrice Belsches, an independent historian, researcher, and author was chosen for the Richmond “griot.”

Sponsorships for a Griot

If you care deeply that the traditions of African Americans in Virginia find support through the VFH Griot Apprenticeship, please contact Elizabeth Piper, Director of Development, at 434-243-9069 or epiper@virginia.edu. Your support can help sustain this program.
Life for Me Ain’t Been No Crystal Stair

In May, VFH will join with the communities on Virginia’s Eastern Shore in celebrating publication of a new book by Frances Latimer titled Life for Me Ain’t Been No Crystal Stair. The book is a collection of biographies of African Americans from the Shore who have made important contributions in the fields of medicine, law, politics, education, sports, business, and the arts. The title comes from a poem by Langston Hughes, “Mother to Son.”

Like its predecessor, Landmarks, which profiles the Shore’s African American historic sites, Life for Me... is the first book of its kind for this part of Virginia. Both books were supported with grants from VFH. Both were researched and written by Ms. Latimer, who was widely regarded as one of Virginia’s best community historians prior to her death in November 2010.

Like Ed Henderson, Elvatrice Belsches, and many other keepers of local knowledge in Virginia, Frances Latimer was a griot. Her roots as a historian went deep into the communities of the Eastern Shore. Frances had no students, no apprentice, and there is currently no one to take up the work she left unfinished. But fortunately, a group of her friends and colleagues, other historians of the Shore, were able to finish and publish her last book posthumously.

The event celebrating publication of Life for Me Ain’t Been No Crystal Stair will be held at the Barrier Islands Center in Machipongo on Monday evening, May 20. For further information, contact the VFH.
FROM Bolivia TO Virginia

AN INTERVIEW WITH EMMA VIOLAND-SANCHEZ

BY DAVID BEARINGER

Emma Violand-Sanchez joined the VFH Board in September, 2010. Since then, she has been a strong and persistent advocate for our engagement with the “new Virginia.” Emma was born in Cochabamba, in central Bolivia, and she first came to Virginia as a high school student in 1961. She earned bachelor's and master's degrees from Radford College (now Radford University) and holds a Doctorate in Education from the George Washington University. She has been a pioneer in the field of bilingual education and has worked passionately on behalf of educational opportunity for all Virginia students. She was the first Latina elected to the Arlington County School Board in 2009, and she is currently the first Latina to serve as Arlington School Board Chair. I spoke with Emma recently about her experience, both as a young immigrant and as a community leader and role model; and about her views on a wide range of topics ranging from the immigrant experience to the humanities and why they matter.

DB: Why did you leave Bolivia? What brought you to the United States initially?

EVS: My father had been exiled for organizing against the government. I was one of six daughters, and my mother couldn’t support all of us in Bolivia. I had an aunt who was living in the United States at the time, and so it was decided that the three oldest girls—I was the second—would come here. I was to live with an American family and attend school. The quota for visas for immigrants from Latin America had just been raised, and sponsorships were available. My parents made the decision, and that was that.

DB: What was your experience, being a new immigrant to Virginia?

EVS: I came to live with a Quaker family in Lorton. I was a senior in high school. One of my sisters was living in the same neighborhood, but mostly I was living here without a support system. I had very limited English. Back home, I had excelled academically. Those cultural ties did not exist here. And I missed my family.

DB: So how did you manage, with limited English and without a community or family to support you?

EVS: What I did have was a strong background in my native language, Spanish. This is one of the things that helped me to succeed academically. Strength in native language is crucial to success as a bilingual person, and maybe this is why I became interested in bilingual education later on. My host family was kind, and they gave me the support I needed. They wanted their children to learn Spanish. So I taught them Spanish and the family tutored me in English. They encouraged me to go to college. I wanted to be a teacher. In the end, I was awarded a four-year scholarship to Radford. I had a work-study grant that paid for my housing. But the kind of help that allowed me to get an education in the 1960s would not be available to me now.

DB: Why not?

EVS: I had no “permanent resident” status. I came at a time when that was not required. Today, a young person from Bolivia might be admitted to a state-supported school in Virginia. But he or she would not be eligible to receive state or federal financial aid and they would have to pay out-of-state tuition. For most of them, it’s almost impossible.

DB: How did you become a citizen?

EVS: It’s a complicated story. My first husband was killed in Vietnam, in 1968, and I went back to Bolivia after he died. I couldn’t imagine how I could survive in the U.S. without him, and without my family, and so I left for eight years.

DB: What did you do there, when you went home?

EVS: Back in Bolivia, I was able to use my education to establish a nonprofit organization to provide teachers for rural schools. I had come to see that education opens doors to opportunities. I began to develop myself professionally. But as a young Bolivian woman, I faced the glass ceiling and there were very few opportunities for professional growth. In fact, there was resistance.

DB: But you didn’t accept it….

EVS: I helped to create a movement of women. We would hold conferences, use the media to try to raise awareness about the need for women to be educated. But there was very little I could do to change the situation. And that’s how I made the decision to come back to the United States, in 1976, to get my doctorate in education.

DB: And to become a U.S. citizen….

EVS: I had taken that step earlier. You see, in those days, to keep my visa active, I had to come back to the U.S. at least once a year. On one of these visits, someone from Immigration Services told me that, as the widow of a veteran, I was entitled to educational benefits if I became a citizen. The process was easy and quick. And so, when I returned to the U.S. permanently in 1976, I was already a U.S. citizen, although I really didn’t yet consider myself to be.

DB: Why not?

EVS: I still didn’t feel that I really belonged here.

DB: But you didn’t feel like you belonged in Bolivia either.

EVS: The thing about the U.S. that attracted me here, and that kept me here in the end, was the promise of an education. When I came back in ’76, I settled first in Alexandria, but I soon got a job with the Arlington Public Schools. When I moved to Arlington, I slowly began to feel more at home: I could go out and have a Saltena (a traditional Bolivian pastry filled with meat and vegetables). I could be with other immigrants.

DB: What was your job with the public schools?

EVS: I was building programs to help Arlington’s immigrant communities. I used my bilingual skills. I became the first bilingual Spanish teacher in Arlington, and I started the county’s first bilingual education program. I became the supervisor of all programs for what we now call “English language learners.” I also became a community activist.

DB: An activist in what sense?

EVS: I wanted to open up opportunities for immigrants, so I started the first bilingual GED Program in Virginia. I also felt very strongly that what had happened—and was still happening to African Americans in the U.S. was unjust. When I was at Radford, I was welcomed there as a foreign student; but in
those days, African Americans couldn’t attend. I thought that if I had had these opportunities, African Americans and new immigrants—all people—should have them too.

DB: You said earlier that education opens doors to opportunities. Do you mean specifically job opportunities?

EVS: Yes, but not exclusively. The United States gave me, as an immigrant, the opportunity to be where I am now; but in the process, it’s also given me the opportunity to help others, to make sure that they have similar opportunities.

DB: What about responsibilities? You’ve become a leader, a role model. What does that mean to you?

EVS: In this, the opportunities and the responsibilities are the same: to serve others; and to be a voice for people who may be—or feel themselves to be—without a voice.

DB: Identity is often complex, especially for immigrants. How do you see yourself?

EVS: I think that identity is formed through a process of development. We have to integrate multiple identities. I’m a Latina. I’m a Bolivian American. An Arlingtonian. And also an elected official, someone who is responsible to serve the entire community.

DB: And also a Virginian?

EVS: Yes, of course. Virginia gave me the educational opportunity that shaped who I became. The education I received here also gave me the tools to make a difference in my home country. The nonprofit I helped to establish all these years ago is still there. Virginia was a place where people welcomed me. At Radford, I was a foreign student, but not a “foreigner.” In Arlington, I’ve been able to be the person I really am.

DB: As a member of the VFH Board of Directors, you’ve urged us to find ways to improve the understanding of Virginia history among all Virginia students. Why does this matter?

EVS: It’s important for everyone who lives here to understand what Virginia is—and how it became what it is. How can you become rooted in a place if you don’t understand your context, the place where you are living? But it’s complicated. Today, in Arlington, 70 percent of the elementary school children who are learning English as a second language were born in this country, not somewhere else; and many of them were born in Virginia. Pride in being a Virginian means pride in being accepted as a Virginian, of not being looked at as a foreigner here. But for many immigrants, even for people who have been here for a long time, being a Virginian is not always the first thing that comes to mind.

DB: Why do you think that is?

EVS: In Spanish, we have the word—arraigada—which means rootedness. It’s where you sprouted, where you came up, so to speak. Once you have that, once you have a strong sense of who you are and where you come from, you can go out and discover other places. The world is open to you. But you really need to develop that sense as a child. It’s much harder to develop as you grow older.

Look at it from the child’s perspective. How can you understand who you are if you can’t locate yourself in the story? You need to know where you are, the story of where you are, and also the stories of where you came from. This is something that the children of the “New Virginia” have to negotiate. And it’s very difficult.

DB: What helps to preserve, or create that sense of “rootedness” in a new place?

EVS: Your language, first of all. Knowing that you can continue to speak your language. Bilingual education is vitally important. Also, your faith and community connections. Celebrations, the cultural traditions that are native to your native land. The food, the music.

DB: What about the humanities? Why do the humanities matter?

EVS: Whenever we talk about the humanities, we’re talking about what makes a human being. What enriches you? What makes you unique? What connects you to other people? What makes a community? What brings cultures together? I think the answer to all these questions is what we call the humanities.

DB: As opposed to the so-called STEM disciplines?

EVS: I wouldn’t say “opposed.” Science, technology, engineering, math, these are important. But the humanities bring life. They bring respect and understanding. They open up the doors of history and culture.

DB: Some parts of history are extremely painful.

EVS: It’s true. History is full of wounds. But if you don’t understand and acknowledge the wounds, you can’t heal. We are all human beings. We have similar needs. At the roots, our experience is the same. Understanding is possible.

DB: What matters most to you now?

EVS: Well, my family. My family is here in Arlington, so there’s a sense of completion. Separation is a common part of the immigrant experience. Both of my children are educators. Both are now teaching the children of immigrants. I’m very proud of that. My daughter told me not long ago that in our home she learned the importance of education and also about the importance of community.

DB: Ok, so what makes a strong community? What is the “glue,” so to speak?

EVS: I’m a great believer in the power of what we call folklife, of cultural traditions like the dances in Cochabamba when I was young. Whatever builds and strengthens community, it’s important to hold onto that.

DB: Is this part of your work now, building community?

EVS: I want the schools to be a center of community; a place for welcoming immigrants, involving the families, developing the students as leaders, to help them to be contributing members of society. That’s what we were trying to do in creating the first bilingual education programs many years ago. That’s what I’m trying to do now—to raise the achievement of all students, to prepare them to be global citizens. That’s my passion.
DOMINION RESOURCES:
MIXING DOLLARS AND DEEDS

The relationship between Dominion Resources and Virginia Foundation for the Humanities dates back to the first Festival of the Book in 1994. Dominion became VFH’s very first corporate sponsor and has supported the Book Festival every year since. Along with its backing of our digital initiatives, their support represents more than $320,000 cumulatively.

Why would an energy company partner with a humanities organization?
“Our customers don’t have a choice for their power needs so it’s important for us to be in all communities. VFH appeals to a statewide group that communicates with thought leaders and we want them to understand that we are not just selling a product but also a service,” explains Bob Blue, senior vice president for Dominion and a VFH board member. “We’re a company that recognizes the importance of good engineering, but also how it fits into a broader world of art and culture.”

Marjorie Grier, Dominion’s director of corporate philanthropy and vice president of the Dominion Foundation, notes that, “With the economic downturn, Dominion has focused more on immediate needs, but we also recognize the need for inspiration, things that feed the spirit as well as the body. The Festival of the Book inspires so many people’s minds, taking us away from the humdrum of everyday life and putting hope in our hearts.” She adds, “Books are such a common denominator for all people and it’s rewarding to see the crowds and the diversity represented at the Book Festival!”

Last year, Richmond-based Dominion funded more than $21.3 million in its service areas—70 percent of them in Virginia. While it’s logical for an energy firm to support conservation and environmental needs, being broad-based is of importance, too, and the Foundation’s efforts reach as far as Ohio, Connecticut, and Iowa.

In 2007, when VFH approached Dominion for support for a new digital program, Encyclopedia Virginia (EV), company officials rose to the occasion. Four years later, Dominion came back with support of an affiliated project, the Virginia Indian Archive.

History is crucial to Dominion and its corporate identity, yet giving can be personal, too. Dominion just celebrated its 100-year anniversary. “Dominion has really grown up with the Commonwealth,” Blue notes, “so the idea of making all of that Virginia history accessible and easier to understand through EV was an investment we wanted to make.”

Grier, an avid reader since she was a child, sometimes has to remember that funding the Book Festival is on behalf of Dominion and not only serving her own passions. The company’s supported projects all become personal, in Blue’s words, “because Dominion employees are committed to volunteering time throughout the state and are strongly encouraged to do so as part of Dominion’s corporate culture.”

This philanthropic corporate culture, where giving dollars is equal to giving time, is modeled by the company’s CEO Tom Farrell, who is very active in an array of community causes.

Dominion further reinforces this culture of giving back by paying for eight hours a year of employee volunteer time, and through a gift-matching program. Dominion Impact Day allows employees to pick a theme (for example, military veterans in 2012) and volunteer their time to organizations with ties to that theme. Dominion then donates $1000 on behalf of each staff volunteer.

VFH was delighted to welcome Bob Blue to our board of directors in 2011. Bob admits to thinking he knew a lot about his home state of Virginia at the time, but says he has since learned so much from serving on the Board, especially about smaller areas of the state that receive little notice.

Special thanks go to Marjorie Grier, who retires in May, and Bob Blue whose work continues to strengthen the reach of the humanities in the Commonwealth.

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UPCOMING DIGITAL INITIATIVES

Interested in furthering VFH’s work in the field of digital initiatives? Take a look at what’s coming up and see how you can help:

THE FOLKLIFE ARCHIVES • An exciting and important project in collaboration with our Folklife Program, the Folklife Archives include video and sound material for the web, which will deliver, preserve, record, and disseminate Virginia’s folk heritage.

SLAVERY CONTENT • An upcoming section of Encyclopedia Virginia will include content about the origins, life, and eventual emancipation of enslaved people in Virginia.

ENCYCLOPEDIA VIRGINIA MOBILE APP • This promises not only to be a very useful application for iOS and Android mobile devices, but a cool one, too!

For information on how you can help support these initiatives, please contact our Director of Development Elizabeth Piper, at 434-243-9069 or epiper@virginia.edu.

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VFH Views / SPRING 2013
Brink and Roy Join VFH Board of Directors

IN NOVEMBER, VFH WELCOMED TWO NEW BOARD MEMBERS

Delegate Robert Brink rejoined the VFH Board. He had served two terms previously, including one as Chair. Brink grew up in Illinois, received his BA from Monmouth College, served in the military in Vietnam, and received his JD from the Marshall-Wythe School of Law at The College of William and Mary. Brink has represented the 48th Delegate District in Arlington and McLean since 1998. He serves on the Appropriations, Transportation, and Privileges and Elections committees. Prior to his election to the General Assembly, Brink worked in a number of legislative positions at the federal level, including counsel to various House committees and deputy assistant attorney general for legislative affairs in the U.S. Department of Justice. He also serves on the Board of the Federation of State Humanities Councils. Brink lives in Arlington, VA.

Dr. Rita Roy, co-founder and President of Astute Technology, is a first-time member of the VFH Board. Roy, a physician, has a career which combines a rare expertise in medicine and technology, including building complex web applications, transforming ideas into successful internet-based business models, and advising and developing e-learning web applications and database driven marketing strategies for nonprofits, associations, and universities. Prior to joining Astute Technology, Roy co-founded and served as president of Medical Consumer Media. She received her MD from the George Washington University Medical Center and lives in Reston, VA. She has served on many boards, including the World Congress on Information Technology, the Langley School Board of Trustees, the Children’s Museum of Northern Virginia, the Community Advisory Board for the Junior League of Northern Virginia, and the Programs Board for Operation Smile.

Ben Adams, Upper Mattaponi traditional dancer.

In the United States, our national historical narrative centers around the story of European arrival and westward movement. It tends to include peoples and events seen as integral to the mainstream story line and to exclude or minimize those who are not. American Indians have often been presented as obstacles to American progress, or as earlier versions of human beings on the evolutionary scale.

Until 2008, the Virginia Standards of Learning that addressed American Indian topics were written in past tense, leading students to believe that Indians no longer exist as contemporary Americans. Typical language read: “Indians wore buckskin. They hunted and fished. They lived in teepees, pueblos, or wigwams.” The Standards referenced Pocahontas but not her father, Powhatan.

Images of Virginia Indians were frozen in the past. Today’s teachers rely on primary sources to help tell the story of Virginia and the nation. Virginia Indian primary sources are few, because their history was transmitted orally, and few drawings or documents have survived. The Virginia Indian Archive helps to redress this historical omission by gathering available images and other primary sources together and making them accessible to tribes, students, researchers, and the public.

With funding from Dominion Resources and the Mary Morton Parsons Foundation, and in partnership with Encyclopedia Virginia, the Virginia Indian Archive will make historic photographs, documents, oral histories, and other resources available to students, researchers, and the public not just in Virginia but throughout the world. Never before has this information been accessible to the public, and VFH is thrilled to be able to bring light to these important collections of Virginia Indians.

This project represents a collaboration between VFH’s Encyclopedia Virginia and Virginia Indian Programs and is just one of the recent digital humanities projects happening at the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities. Research shows that more than 74 percent of teachers rely on the internet for material to help them form their lesson plans. Endeavors like the Virginia Indian Archive provide the accurate and accessible information that educators need.

The Virginia Indian Archive project was launched in March at a VFH event hosted by Bob and Liz Blue and Chris and Ashley Peace. We look forward to public launches across Virginia this summer.
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VFH GRANTS
VFH grants provide support for programs that address important issues and enrich the cultural life in Virginia: exhibits • public forums & discussions • film, video, radio, & digital media • publications • research • teachers’ institutes & seminars • oral history projects • lectures & conferences. Since 1974, VFH has awarded more than 3,000 grants to nonprofit organizations that serve audiences throughout the Commonwealth. October 15, 2013, is the next deadline for submitting an Open Grant request. (See VirginiaHumanities.org/grants). Discretionary Grant requests are accepted any time.

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