Sustaining Local History: Honoring Virginia’s Community Historians

BY DAVID BEARINGER

On Thanksgiving morning, 2010, one of Virginia’s best historians died in a hospital in Atlanta after a long illness. She was sixty-nine, had never taught a college history course, and her degrees were in sociology and education, not history. She didn’t begin to discover her true gift—or her work as an historian—until she was in her late forties. But she loved the place she came from; and she knew it well.

Frances Latimer was raised on stories in a family that had been a part of the Eastern Shore of Virginia for hundreds of years—thousands if you count her ancestors among the native tribes in what is now Northampton County.

For many people on the Shore—and for others who care deeply about its history—she was a living bridge; and her work was a perpetual spring. Through it, the waters of the past flowed into the present—out of the rocks of old ledgers, deeds, wills, chancery records, long-forgotten letters and newspapers, even tombstones.

Because she had experienced it firsthand, she understood the mischief that ignorance of the past can do. She always wanted to know more, to dig deeper in among the roots of her community; and for others to know what she herself had learned there.

She believed it was her duty, and ours, to learn the names of people who had been nameless, or whose names had been forgotten: of men and women who had been enslaved, or had lived free but worked and died without the recognition their achievements deserved.

For her, their stories mattered, too. She didn’t flinch from the truth, whatever it revealed. But she also made the study of history, as it should be, an act of love.

It was also a craft she practiced diligently, day after day, year after year. She was largely self-taught, but she became a master of the historian’s tools. The breadth of her knowledge and her memory was astounding. Her research was meticulous and painstaking.

But she also had the instinct. She could follow a hunch through the courthouse records, remembering some story she had heard as a child or something her father had said to a neighbor or an uncle thirty years before, and discover a missing puzzle-piece, a connection no other historian had yet made.

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When she couldn’t remember, or she wasn’t sure, she sought out the people in her community who were older than she was, whose lines of memory were even longer than hers, the oldest trees with the deepest roots.

Being from the Eastern Shore and a part of its root system herself, she knew whom to ask, where to look, where to dig to uncover the springs, to tap the underground rivers of a community’s memory of itself.

She worried and mourned that this shared memory—of African American life on the Eastern Shore—was fading; that few younger people could be found who knew or cared much about the past, people who would carry the history of their community with them as they themselves grew old.

Because of this, she felt an even greater urgency, a deeper sense of obligation, to do everything possible, to keep working even when she was too ill to work. To save whatever could be saved, record whatever could be written down, so that others could pick up the threads and begin weaving again where she had left off—and would remember.

Frances Latimer’s gifts as an historian were exceptional. But they were not unique.

There are hundreds of community historians like her, most of them also self-taught, working today in every part of Virginia.

These are people whose knowledge of their own communities is profound; for whom the study of history is also an act of love; and whose passion for the undergrowth of a community’s memory—of African American life on the Eastern Shore—was fading; that few younger people could be found who knew or cared much about the past, people who would carry the history of their community with them as they themselves grew old.

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These are people whose knowledge of their own communities is profound; for whom the study of history is also an act of love; and whose passion for the history of a street, a neighborhood, a city or county, or a region like the Eastern Shore is one of the deepest motivations in their lives.

When the love of history is personal, it taps a powerful force. It leads some of those who possess it to become collectors and archivists, teachers and mentors, oral historians, authors; to learn the arcane intricacies of their local courthouse records.

Passion born of love for a place, combined with knowledge gained through a lifetime of connectedness—of being part of a community’s “root system”—is spread throughout Virginia like a vast underground energy reserve.

This reserve is inexhaustible, because it’s also renewable, as long as the knowledge and the passion are carried forward, one generation passing it on to the next.

But the transfer from generation to generation is becoming more and more difficult everywhere, in more prosperous areas where neighborhoods are changing or “re-developing,” as well as in places like the Eastern Shore where young people often leave home in search of better opportunities.

When it comes to the study of local or regional history, there are two complementary streams of knowledge. One is based on academic study; the other is rooted in the community itself. Both are essential. Neither is as strong alone as it is when it’s joined with the other.

Sometimes, on rare occasions, the two streams flow together in a single individual, someone like Frances Latimer whose research skills have been developed to the highest levels but who can also...
AboVe: Arlene Giffel, a member of Virginia’s upper Mattaponi Tribe, created a digital oral history collection by gathering memories of the former students at the Sharon Indian School, which closed in 1963.

RigHt: Oral historian Jim Crawford interviewed dozens of tobacco farming families and worked alongside Southside resident Kinney Rorrer to produce the documentary film “Down in the Old Belt: Voices from the Tobacco South.”

speak—and listen—with the authority that comes from knowing first-hand the history of a place or a community.

More often, the two streams are separate, not embodied in a single person. They do their work in parallel, not in tandem.

For almost forty years, the VFH has supported efforts to add new strands to the braid of Virginia history, to encourage the telling of the story of Virginia from many perspectives, and to explore the complex web of local, regional, and community histories that make up the Commonwealth.

In doing this, we have worked hard, wherever possible, to bring the two streams of historical knowledge together. Because the best, most fruitful historical research demands both: passion and memory—connectedness—on the one hand; training, skill, and an understanding of broader context on the other.

Admittedly, it can be difficult at times to bring academic and community-based scholars together. Sometimes, it’s a problem of language and differing approach. Sometimes, issues of trust are involved. From the local perspective, “outsider” interest may be suspect, and gaining access can be difficult. From the academic perspective, the ability of “insiders” to look at their own history objectively is sometimes questioned.

It takes time to build understanding and mutual respect.

Very early in our work, the VFH made a commitment to honor and to place the authority of community-based scholars on an equal footing with academically trained experts. This does not mean, necessarily, that community and academic scholars know the same things or bring the same tools to the work at hand: only that both sets of tools are needed.

This commitment, radical at the time it was made, has—we believe—literally changed the face of Virginia history, and made fruitful scores of local, regional, and community-based history projects that would not have been possible otherwise.

Mostly, in our experience, this blending of the two streams of historical knowledge has been relatively easy to accomplish. Sometimes, the requirements of our funding have provided the incentive for those involved in community-based history projects to reach out to academic experts, who were more than willing to help.

Our networks of scholars—academic and community-based—are often tapped as resources; and we now have scores of examples of successful collaboration that can serve as models and an inspiration to others.

A few days after her death, another respected historian of the Eastern Shore, Miles Barnes—himself an academically trained community historian whose family roots on the Shore reach back to the seventeenth century—wrote that Frances Latimer “...possessed an encyclopedic knowledge of the Eastern Shore’s past...” and that her passing “…is an inestimable loss to her family, to her friends, and to students of the Eastern Shore of Virginia history.”

Something very similar could be said of many other local historians in Virginia, men and women from many different walks of life who are the stewards of their communities’ past.

The knowledge they hold in trust for the future is irreplaceable. Whenever one of these reservoirs of local historical memory is lost, the future is to some degree impoverished.

In addition to being an historian and a legendary genealogist, Frances Latimer was a publisher, and she left behind as part of her legacy a long shelf of books—her own work and others—and a body of research on which other scholars can build.

But she also left behind a half-dozen or more unfinished research projects, some near to completion, others barely begun.

What becomes of these projects now is uncertain. But the more important question for the long term is, who will take up the work now that she’s gone? Who will be the next Frances Latimer? She had no apprentice; no students. Neither do the vast majority of community historians of her generation.

The VFH is honored to have worked closely with Frances Latimer and with other community historians like her, statewide, over almost four decades now. We are committed to do what we can to keep these springs of knowledge flowing.

It would be impossible to name them all; almost as difficult to mention just a few.

But named and unnamed, known or unknown, we are grateful for the work these historians do. We value them as colleagues, partners, collaborators, mentors, and friends.
African American Museums and Historic Sites Network Holds Inaugural Meeting

BY CAROLYN CADES

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FH and the Virginia Association of Museums, in partnership with a Steering Committee of representatives from eight Virginia museums and one independent collector, are working to establish a statewide network of Virginia’s African American museums and historic sites.

The first statewide meeting of the group, planned to coincide with the 2011 VAM Conference in Portsmouth, was held on March 15 at the Portsmouth Renaissance Hotel. The meeting was preceded by two related panels and a VAM-sponsored reception.

More than ninety people attended the inaugural meeting, and the level of enthusiasm was high. The group reviewed a draft Prospectus and a series of initial recommendations developed by the Steering Committee, and adopted an organizational framework for the Network’s first year. VFH and VAM will continue to play a central role, supporting the work of the Steering Committee and coordinating communication and outreach to members (see below).

Regional sub-networks will be established, and there will be two statewide Network meetings in the first year, one in the fall and a second in conjunction with the 2012 VAM Conference next March.

On the morning preceding the meeting, a VFH-sponsored double session addressed “Interpreting African American History: Challenges & Opportunities for Museums & Historic Sites,” with Chair Lauranett Lee, Curator of African American History, Virginia Historical Society, and speakers Audrey Davis, Assistant Director/Curator, Alexandria Black History Museum; Maureen Elgersman Lee, Executive Director, The Black History Museum and Cultural Center of Virginia; Teresa Roane, Library Manager, Museum of the Confederacy; and Carla Whitfield, superintendent of the Booker T. Washington Birthplace.

The panel addressed the fact that African American museums and historic sites, as well as museums offering substantial African American programming, face unique challenges of historical interpretation. They can also be powerful reservoirs of local memory, uncovering and documenting untold stories in the effort to overcome an established historical narrative that excludes or provides only token acknowledgment of African American history. These institutions are uniquely positioned to join two streams of knowledge, uniting deeply-rooted traditional or community-based knowledge with academic research. This session addressed the ways that museums and historic sites can work together and individually to enrich and broaden the public understanding of Virginia’s African American history, and the particular challenges that they face.

The new African American Museums and Historic Sites Network is an outgrowth of the Central Virginia Museums Network, established with a 2004-2006 IMLS grant, to strengthen and build capacity in the six participating museums.

Membership in the statewide Network is open to museums and historic sites with a sustained and significant focus on Virginia’s African American history, as well as to other cultural organizations and individuals with extensive collections that shed light on the stories of African Americans in Virginia.

The African American Museums and Historic Sites Network will offer many long-term benefits to Virginia—especially to residents of the Commonwealth, to tourists and other visitors, and to the organizations involved.

African American Museums and Historic Sites Network Steering Committee

Marian Veney Ashton, Director, Armstead Tasker Johnson Museum, Montross
Audrey Davis, Assistant Director & Curator, Alexandria Black History Museum, Alexandria
Lauranett Lee, Curator of African American History, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond
Maureen Elgersman Lee, Executive Director, The Black History Museum and Cultural Center of Virginia, Richmond
Therbia U. Parker, Sr., Historian and Collector, Suffolk
Cheryl Robinson, Museum Administrator, Legacy Museum, Lynchburg
Benjamin C. Ross, Church Historian, Sixth Mt. Zion Baptist Church, Richmond
Earle P. Taylor, St. Joseph Memorial Park, Richmond
Carla Whitfield, Superintendent, Booker T. Washington National Monument, Hardy
Sephardic Music in Charlottesville

BY CAROLYN CADES

Sephardic balladeer and 2002 National Heritage Fellow Flory Jagoda charmed a standing-room-only audience in a January 22 performance sponsored by the Virginia Folklife Program at Congregation Beth Israel in Charlottesville.

Performing with Susan Gaeta, her 2002-2003 Virginia Folklife Apprentice, the two singers filled the 19th century synagogue sanctuary with melody and the warm Old Spanish-based sounds of Ladino (Judeo-Spanish or “Judezmo”), the language of the Jews who settled throughout the Ottoman Empire after their expulsion from Spain in the late 1500s. Transplanting a once richly-flourishing culture in new homelands, the Sephardic Jews formed vibrant communities within the multi-cultural context of cities such as Sarajevo, where Jagoda’s family settled.

In Charlottesville, the gracious Jagoda shared an anecdotal history of Sarajevo’s pre-World War II Jewish and multi-ethnic communities and of her own family, professional musicians who performed at the many celebratory events and holidays that fill the Jewish lunar calendar.

Jagoda and her parents fled Sarajevo during the war, and the teenage Jagoda, already an accomplished accordionist, carried the songs and stories of her “Nona” (grandmother) with her as she took the train alone to Italy. She played her way safely out of Bosnia on her beloved Hohner accordion, following her father’s instruction to “…just play. Don’t say anything, just play…” filling the compartment with singing passengers, including the conductor, who forgot to ask for her ticket.

Jagoda’s extended family was not as fortunate; Jagoda later learned that all of them, including her beloved Nona, had perished at the hands of the Bosnian Fascists during the war, along with the majority of the town’s Jewish population.

Reunited with her parents in Bari, Italy, Jagoda worked on a U.S. Army base, where she met and married an American sergeant, eventually moving to the U.S. after the war and settling in Northern Virginia. After raising her children, Jagoda returned to the music which had nourished her, writing and performing songs in the Sephardic style to keep the memory of her family and their musical traditions alive. In Charlottesville, Jagoda played her Hohner for the first time in many years, the same lilting Bosnian folk song that she had played in the train as she fled her homeland.

Jagoda has performed throughout the United States and in Europe (including a performance in Sarajevo after the recent civil war), and is a generous teacher, preserving an endangered cultural and linguistic tradition through her work with musicians and aspiring Ladino speakers.

The concert was a benefit for the Flora Jagoda Sephardic Music fund at the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, established with an initial gift from Susan Gaeta to help preserve, support, and perpetuate the Sephardic musical tradition by providing operating income and special assistance for projects in Sephardic music and culture.

To learn more about Flory and support the Fund, please visit VirginiaFolklife.org/jagoda or call Carolyn Cades at 434-924-7202.
We, the people, have always been obsessed with the Civil War, and not necessarily in a good way. My grandmother made no secret of her distain the first time she saw me uniformed in Confederate butternut, a slouch hat drooping down over my eyes. “Your pants are a muddy mess,” she cried before turning anxiously to my mother. “How could he do that?”

My dad was equally disgusted, but for different reasons. A history teacher with Iowa roots, politics to the left of Trotsky, and an African American daughter, he objected to what he considered to be my symbolic defense of slavery. And indeed, around the campfire my fellow reenactors insisted that Virginia and all the rest were right to secede, and no, it had nothing to do with slavery.

I quit the hobby after participating in the 125th anniversary reenactment of the Battle of Gettysburg. As we marched through the oppressive July heat, a guy in front of me—clad in cotton longjohns, wool pants, a linen shirt, and a wool shell jacket, everything authentic right down to the buttons—collapsed and died of a heart attack.

That’s the one bit of authenticity you’re not supposed to have at a reenactment, and yet, it occurred to me, it’s the only one that matters.

Twenty-five years later, we have arrived at the Civil War sesquicentennial. As a Commonwealth and as a nation, our arguments over what the conflict meant closely mirror my own family’s. Looking into the eyes of those Confederates captured at Gettysburg and famously photographed by Mathew Brady, we still ask, “How could they do that?” And we wonder what on earth they were fighting for.

Secession is still very much a part of today’s political rhetoric, and, as last year’s Confederate History Month demonstrated, the struggle with race’s role continues. Did two battalions of black Confederate soldiers fight for Stonewall Jackson, as Virginia’s new fourth-grade textbook claims? And if we say no, does that change what the war means for us?

The Virginia Foundation for the Humanities is marking the sesquicentennial by actively joining this conversation. Senior fellow William W. Freehling recently delivered a televised lecture in which he engaged the complications of slavery. The causes statesmen and soldiers held dear were not always the same as the causes of the war. And yet the majority of justifications, Freehling argued, were tangled up with slavery. Encyclopedia Virginia, meanwhile, has compiled hundreds of scholarly entries, rare photographs, and educational videos on the Civil War. And while the Virginia Sesquicentennial Commission syndicates the content on its website, the New York Times frequently links to it from its “Disunion” blog. Was the Civil War really a poor man’s war, or did slaveholders hold their own in the ranks? Read EV’s entry on the Army of Northern Virginia. Or how did a small-town lawyer who firmly opposed secession end up ordering the town of Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, to be set afire? Read EV’s entry on Jubal A. Early. They capture just a thin sliver of how surprising and unexpected the war can be, even for the obsessed, the certain, the muddy-pants’ed.

To find links to a host of VFH programs—recent grant projects, encyclopedia entries, audio, and video—visit VirginiaFoundation.org/CivilWar150

**ACROSS 150 APRILS**

**RECONSTRUCTING OUR CIVIL WAR OBSESSION**

**BY BRENDAN WOLFE**

**RECENT VFH GRANTS FOR PROJECTS ON THE CIVIL WAR**

12/10 • MUSEUM OF THE CONFEDERACY
A five-day institute for teachers [Summer 2011], to coincide with the beginning of the Sesquicentennial and focusing on “the issues, events and people key to the year 1861.”

12/10 • VIRGINIA SESQUICENTENNIAL OF THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR
A one-day conference to be held at Virginia Tech (Spring, 2011) on “Military Strategy in the American Civil War.” This is the third program in the annual “Signature Conference Series” inaugurated in 2009. VFH helped to fund the first of these programs (at the University of Richmond) entitled “America on the Eve of the Civil War” and was a sponsor of the second “Race, Slavery, and the Civil War: The Tough Stuff of American History and Memory” (at Norfolk State University).

3/11 • EASTERN SHORE OF VIRGINIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY
Funds to support publication of a book on the history and impact of the Civil War on Virginia’s Eastern Shore, including essays, historic photographs, maps, and a bibliography. A collaborative project involving seven Eastern Shore museums and three branches of the Eastern Shore Public Library.

**VFH Radio staff from BackStory and With Good Reason are focusing on the war’s 150th anniversary and associated events to help them educate Virginians about that tumultuous time in US history.**

**WithGoodReasonRadio.org**
In "Showdown in Virginia" WGR interviewed Senior VFH Fellow Bill Freehling, a Civil War scholar and author of the three-volume series, about his recent book by that title. The show focuses on the turning points in Virginia’s months-long, bitter battle over whether to secede from the Union.

"Showdown in Virginia" is available on WithGoodReasonRadio.org and will become part of "a series of Civil War shows that will air statewide and be repackaged for national distribution so that radio stations all over the country may request them for local broadcasting," according to WGR host Sarah McConnell.

**BackStory With the American History Guys**
Sesquicentennial discussions are already underway on the website for BackStory with the American History Guys [BackStoryRadio.org]. Producer Tony Field reminds listeners that they are actively solicit- ing such comments and calls for three upcoming shows with a Civil War focus.

The first, “Secession Crisis,” will look at the six months leading up to the April 1861 attack on Ft. Sumter, followed by “Why Fight?”—a historical examination of motivations behind Americans’ willingness to take up arms against one another. On the third show, the History Guys will take on a variety of listen- ers’ questions, from the classic BackStory approach of “How have historians’ interpretations of the war changed over time?” to any of the dozens of questions already posted to the site.
Visualizing Slavery: An Online Resource

BY KEVIN MCFADDEN

Where does the world go for images of the Atlantic slave trade and slave life in the Americas? To a site co-created by VFH Senior Fellow Jerome Handler.

The Atlantic Slave Trade and Slave Life in the Americas: A Visual Record, a site co-sponsored by VFH and the University of Virginia Library, has been in existence for 10 years. It has increased from about 250 images to about 1,280 images. Handler was responsible for finding and selecting images, writing the accompanying textual entries, and finally placing the images within a bibliographic and historical context.

Michael Tuite, former director, UVA library’s Digital Media Center, was the site’s designer and technical advisor.

The collection is a tool and a resource that can be used by anyone interested in the lives and experiences of captured Africans who were transported across the Atlantic, and the lives of their descendants in the slave societies of the New World.

Images were digitized from a wide range of old published and unpublished sources, from the 1600s to 1900s, and gathered from scores of libraries and archival repositories in this country and abroad.

The website is widely consulted; over the last three years, the site had about 411,000 unique visitors mostly from North America (including Canada) but significant numbers came from Britain and Western Europe, and other thousands from Africa, Australia, Asia, South America and the Caribbean.

SlaveryImages.org is a resource for scholars and commercial presses in this country and abroad seeking images for their books and dust jackets, from individual authors of books ranging from children’s books to scholarly studies. It is also a resource for students, middle school to graduate school; teachers; documentary film makers; TV producers; history and humanities websites; museums preparing exhibitions; and individuals pursuing their own curiosities on the subject.

Who’s using SlaveryImages.org?

» An architectural firm in Richmond requested images for historical markers it is designing for the Richmond Slave Trail Commission.

» The New York State Education Department used some images for its on-line curriculum and instruction website related to the NYS Amistad Commission.


» A photo researcher for the PBS current affairs documentary series FRONTLINE, researching Haiti.

» The United States Library of Congress has selected [SlaveryImages.org] for inclusion in its historic collections of Internet materials.

» The project director of a museum in Newcastle upon Tyne, England, used images in preparing education packets for local schools.

» The University of British Columbia Office of Learning Technology requested materials for use in a home-study on-line course for distance education.

» A resident of Buckingham County, Virginia, is researching her family history under slavery and found an image which helped her: “May I please use the picture of the ‘contraband’ slaves on your website for my family history information?”

» An author in Prague, the Czech Republic, is “working on a book that refers many times to the slave human trade.”

» A producer from the Turkish Radio and Television Corporation, “the only non-commercial public service broadcaster of Turkey” requested images for a documentary on Ottoman slavery.

» And requests keep coming in…
The Virginia Foundation for the Humanities recently held a brainstorming workshop that brought together educators, librarians, museum officials, journalists, film-makers, and policy shapers in Charlottesville during the Virginia Festival of the Book.

The initiative was one of four nationally awarded “Bridging Cultures” grants from the NEH, awarded to the Ali Vural Ak Center for Global Islamic Studies at George Mason University in partnership with VFH. “Beyond Golden Age and Decline” sought to improve the cultural gap between Islamic societies and the American public by focusing on an often misinterpreted period of world history (1300-1900) during which Islamic societies demonstrated a remarkable diversity across religious, ethnic, intellectual, linguistic, artistic, and geographic boundaries.

Three Virginia students placed first in their age levels for the statewide Letters About Literature competition. The Level I winner is Alexis Stafford of John Rolfe Middle School (Henrico). The Level II winner is Audrey Wood of North Branch School (Afton). The Level III winner was Charlotte Boatner-Doane of Charlottesville High School (Charlottesville). Each receives a $50 check, a $50 Target gift card, and was a participating author at the 2011 Virginia Festival of the Book Opening Ceremony. In addition, each winner is entered into the national LAL competition.

For more information on LAL and to see some of the winning letters, visit LettersAboutLiterature.org. LAL is a national reading promotion program of the Center for the Book in the Library of Congress, presented in partnership with Target and affiliate state centers for the book. The Virginia Foundation’s Center for the Book arranges the Virginia competition.

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Pictured from left are Safa Zarrour (Islamic Society of North America), Nihad Awad (Council on American-Islamic Relations), Vellee Ay (GMU staff), Hillary Wiesner (Carnegie Corporation of New York), Azhar Hussein (International Center for Religion and Democracy), Heidi Shoup (World Affairs Council), and Mona Shami (American Institutes for Research).
The “Lost Communities of Virginia”

“Community” is a haunted word when it’s stitched to an empty storefront; to weeds growing through the floorboards, rusting track-line, an abandoned gas-pump, or a once-crowded intersection where only a handful of cars now pass in a day.

Almost ten years ago, in 2002, the VFH awarded a grant to the Community Design Assistance Center at Virginia Tech, to support further research on a project begun two years earlier.

The goal was to document towns and other distinctive (mostly rural) places in Virginia that had experienced a decline in recent decades, but where the physical remnants and human memories of more prosperous times remained.

The result, ten years later, is a book entitled Lost Communities of Virginia, to be published this Spring by Albemarle Books and distributed by the University of Virginia Press.

It contains several hundred black-and-white photographs and excerpts from recorded interviews with current and former residents of the thirty communities it documents, people who can still recall a way of life that was displaced, abandoned, or pushed aside by the forces of change and “progress.”

The term “lost communities” can be misleading at first: because many of the towns and other places depicted in this book are still essentially intact, and some have actually experienced a significant revival in recent years, adapting rather than succumbing to the forces of change.

As the authors, Kirsten Sparenborg and Terri Fisher, are quick to note, “…it is the industries, transportation modes, and ways of life that once defined [these] communities that have been lost…,” not necessarily the communities themselves.

What they all have in common, in other words, is the loss of an industry or of some unifying presence—a rail line, a wharf, a well-traveled thoroughfare—that changed the place and the reason why it grew up initially and developed as it did.

Some of these communities were created for the purpose of resource extraction, for example; and they declined either when investors withdrew, markets changed, or the resources themselves were depleted.

There are two kinds of loss this book documents, and both are important. One is visible—when buildings collapse or deteriorate, or when the patterns of movement and human interaction that define a community disappear. What remains then takes on another meaning—one that is diminished, or at least profoundly changed from what it was.

The other kind of loss is invisible. It happens when memories die and—as Ms. Fisher writes in her epilogue—the loss of a person, usually an older person who remembers the community’s former life, “creates a hole in the fabric of the continuity of a place.”

There is another side to this, of course. Change brings—and has brought to some of these “lost communities”—revitalization, new energy, new commerce, new forms of social and community life. The former pipe kiln at Pamplin City is now a protected site; Woodford’s train depot has been restored; Mineral has a thriving Bluegrass music festival.

But this is still a book about loss and what happens to a community when its economic foundations shift or disappear altogether—when the coal is gone, when the oyster harvests bottom out, when a superhighway bypasses a town, when the trains that sustained the general store and the local bank are sold for residential development, or when the train depot closes because the rail-line doesn’t carry passengers anymore.

Warehouse towns, railroad towns, mill and mining towns, the villages that served Virginia’s farming communities (the ones this book calls “Gathering Places”)—all have felt the pressures and seen their own versions of the transformation Lost Communities of Virginia documents. And many of them have, in fact, been lost.

What will replace them? In the words of the book’s authors, the mills, general stores, courthouses and other “gathering places” were important because they served the needs of a community for “conducting business and learning the news of the day.” The same words can be used to describe a shopping-mall bookstore or an Internet café.

Will we feel the same sadness when these places, in turn, are gone? “Lost” is a hard word that only softens when it’s not made of bitterness or nostalgia, but of something finer.

Like the sounds that move softly through the photographs of these “lost communities.” The sounds of wind in the clapboard. Of ghost trains at a railway crossing near Eagle Rock. The boot-steps of coal miners walking home at dawn in Stoneta and Derby. The clink of champagne glasses in the hotel dining room at Sweet Chalybeate.

Voices too. From inside the oyster canner-ies at Sharps, the pipe factory in Pamplin City, the old Lutheran church in Jerome, the tobacco warehouses in Danville City, the mill at Clements, the General Store in Capeville….

It was a long wait. Almost ten years. But the publication of Lost Communities of Virginia reminds us of why we chose to invest in the research phase of this project long ago. The questions it raises—about who we are and who we choose to be, about the deeper meaning of words like “community” and “loss”—are among the bedrock questions of the humanities.

In the end, Lost Communities of Virginia isn’t just about the past. It’s also about how we need to love and protect the communities we live in today.
VFH Welcomes New Board Members

Michelle du Pont Olson is a native Washingtonian. She attended Duke University where she received a BA in political science and an MBA in marketing. She held positions at RJR Nabisco and Comcast until 1997 when she started her own business, a line of jewelry that she manufactured by hand, branded, and distributed. She closed her business in 2007 and currently travels to Africa with Vital Voices, a Washington D.C.-based charity, teaching women how to make their jewelry more appealing to a Western audience. She is also working with women from South and Central America, Haiti, and other countries to create sustainable businesses. Michelle lives in McLean with her husband Chris and two daughters.

Delegate Christopher K. Peace represents the Virginia House of Delegates’ 97th District and serves as Executive Director of the Historic Polegreen Church Foundation. A Hanover County native, Peace graduated from St. Christopher’s School, received a B.A. in English from Hampden-Sydney College and earned his law degree from the University of Richmond. He is an alumnus of Leadership Metro Richmond and the Sorensen Institute for Political Leadership. Prior to his service in the legislature, Peace worked at McGuireWoods Consulting, a national public affairs and public relations firm. Currently Peace represents Smithfield Foods, Inc. and is a member of the bar association of the District of Columbia. He is an adjunct professor of legal studies at Virginia Commonwealth University’s Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs. Chris lives in Mechanicsville with his wife, Ashley, their daughter, Camden, and two dogs, Sidney and Laney.

Lacy Ward, Jr., is Director of the Robert Russa Moton Museum in Farmville. Prior to joining the Moton Museum, Ward served as an assistant professor and project manager at Central Virginia Community College, as well as executive director of CASA of Central Virginia. Ward returned to Central Virginia from Tuskegee, Alabama, where he served as superintendent of the Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site, and vice-president for marketing and communications at Tuskegee University. In 2002 he was appointed by President George W. Bush to serve on the Brown v. Board of Education 50th Anniversary Commission. Ward served on the staffs of two Virginia congressmen and is a veteran of the Gulf War. Ward received his master’s degree from Virginia Tech and his bachelor’s degree from Virginia State University. He is a member of the Virginia Advisory Committee of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights; and serves on the boards of the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Living History and Public Policy Center; Preservation Virginia; the Virginia Association of Museums; and the Farmville Area Chamber of Commerce. Ward and his wife, Ardeania, have five adult children and reside in Prospect, Virginia.

Sheryl B. Hayes, Special Assistant to the President, left the Foundation in December to accept the position of Director of Development at the Charlotte Museum of History in Charlotte, North Carolina. Sheryl came to VFH as Director of Development in 1997 and became Special Assistant in 2008. She authored the proposal that led to the creation of the African American Heritage Program and headed the effort that formed the partnership between the VFH and the Fayette Area Historical Initiative in Martinsville. Sheryl was also integral in the creation of a planned giving program at VFH, establishing the Cornerstone Society in 2004. Sheryl will be missed for her enthusiasm, keen eye for detail, and her lovely singing voice.

New Board member Cynthia Fralin was unavailable when we went to press with this issue of VFH Views. We welcome her and will publish her Board biographical sketch in an upcoming issue.
New VFH Staff Members

Caitlin Newman is Assistant Editor of Encyclopedia Virginia. She received a B.A. in English from the University of Virginia in 2006. She was selected for and accepted a position in the Random House Associates Program, a one-year training program in which recent college graduates rotate through various departments within a single publishing house, and has also worked for Random House Children’s Books. Prior to joining VFH, she worked as Copy Editor and Associate Editor of World War II magazine, and helped to establish that publication’s website in 2009.

Thomas Pierce joined VFH radio in 2010 as an Associate Producer for With Good Reason. He received B.A. degrees in English literature and history from Wofford College, and in 2006 he was awarded NPR’s Kroc Fellowship. He has produced and directed NPR’s Weekend Edition. His radio stories — about everything from the last of South Carolina’s shrimpers to hikers on the Appalachian Trail during the recession — have aired on Backstory, Weekend Edition, Morning Edition, and All Things Considered. In 2008, he traveled the country covering the presidential elections for NPR as a field producer, reporter, and blogger. Thomas also writes short stories, the most recent of which was published in Expecting Goodness, an anthology edited by The Atlantic’s C. Michael Curtis. He currently reports radio features for Virginia Public Radio and for VFH.

Kelley Libby is an Associate Producer at With Good Reason. Kelley is originally from Florida and now lives in Spotsylvania, Virginia. She has a B.A. in English from Flagler College and an M.A. in writing and rhetoric from Virginia Commonwealth University. Kelley also studied radio documentary at the Salt Institute for Documentary Studies. When she’s not making radio, Kelley enjoys growing flowers and vegetables.

The Robert C. Vaughan Fellowship

One highlight of the annual VFH Fellows Reunion, held during the Virginia Festival of the Book, was the announcement of our first Robert C. Vaughan Fellow, the “Fellows’ Fellow.” The fund was created by Fellows Alumni who, in appreciation of their own Fellowship, want to ensure that others enjoy the same opportunity. Pictured are (right to left) independent scholar Deborah Lee, the first recipient of the Vaughan Fellowship, VFH President Robert C. Vaughan, founder of the residential fellowship program, former VFH Fellow Kathleen Wilson, a member of the Fellowship Advisory Committee who initiated the campaign for a fellows-funded award, and current fellow Marika Preziuso, the 2010-2011 recipient of another VFH named fellowship, the Emilia Galla Struppa Fellowship in the Humanities created in 2002. The VFH’s third named fellowship is the Edna and Norman Freehling Fellowship in South Atlantic Studies created in 2006 by Dr. William W. Freehling, a distinguished historian and the VFH’s own Senior Fellow, in memory of his parents. It supports research and writing on the South Atlantic region, including the Caribbean South. The 2010-2011 recipient is VFH Fellow Michael Jarvis (not pictured), Associate Professor of History, University of Rochester. Dr. Jarvis won the 2010 James A. Rawley Prize in Atlantic History for his book In the Eye of All Trade: Bermuda, Bermudians, and the Maritime Atlantic World, 1680-1783.
Preserving History

Scrabble School, a former two-room schoolhouse on Rt. 522 in Rappahannock County, provides a window into the story of the Rosenwald Schools, funded by Julius Rosenwald in partnership with local communities to build, upgrade, and furnish schools for black students throughout the South (some 5,000 in all). VFH supported the efforts of the Scrabble School Preservation Foundation to ensure that the school’s important history in the community will not be forgotten.

For more information, visit the Virginia African American Historic Sites database [www.AAHeritageVa.org](http://www.AAHeritageVa.org) or the Scrabble School website, [ScrabbleSchool.org](http://ScrabbleSchool.org).