

Portsmouth VA 250 Committee Meeting

August 3, 2023

UNOFFICIAL MINUTES CONTRIBUTED BY KEITH TOLER, ASST.DIRECTOR TOURISM

ATTENDEES: Audrey Lassiter, Billie Cook, Dan Schmidt, Dr. Cassandra Newby-Alexander, Dr. Michael Hogan, Jacqueline Johnson, Karen Washburn, Keith Toler, Hon. Mark Hugel, Pam McKittrick, Tom Sasso, Alexis Gardner, James McCann.

Staff Facilitator James McCann called the meeting to order at 10 AM.

Roundtable introductions of attendees:

- Keith Toler, Asst. Director **Portsmouth Tourism**
- Tom Sasso, Director **Youth Virginia Regiment**
- Karen Washburn, Creative Director **History Alive/Chair Lafayette 2024: Return to Portsmouth**
- Pam McKittrick, **Daughters of the American Revolution**
- Alexis Gardner, **Hill House Museum/Daughters of the American Revolution**
- Billie Cook, Director **Not Just for February Players; African American Historical Society**
- Audrey Lassiter, President **Olde Towne Business Association**
- Dan Schmidt, Director **V.P. Hill House Museum**
- Hon. Mark Hugel, **Portsmouth City Councilman**
- Dr. Michael Hogan, **Curator Portsmouth Museums**
- Dr. Cassandra Newby-Alexander, **Endowed Professor of Virginia Black History and Culture at Norfolk State University**
- James McCann, **Portsmouth Tourism Manager/VA250 Committee Facilitator**

James McCann introduced guest speaker, Cheryl Wilson, Executive Director VA250. Cheryl complimented Portsmouth on the make-up of its committee, as well as already having the required resolution in place. She continued with a presentation explaining VA250 and how it came to about:

- Virginia is leading the effort for the nation
- Other States are coming along as well
- Virginia accepted this leadership role because “Virginia’s History is America’s Story”

- Karen Washburn suggested “Portsmouth’s History is Virginia’s Story”

Cheryl emphasized that we are not just talking about a revolution of war but also a revolution of ideas and described the March meeting, a national summit held in Williamsburg called **A Common Cause for All**.

- The group convened to discuss plans for the upcoming Semiquincentennial
- There were featured presentations from Carly Fiorina, Bill Whitaker, and former Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy, to name a few.
- The meeting was set to coincide with the 250-year anniversary of Virginia’s Committee of Correspondence which met in Williamsburg at the Raleigh Tavern on March 12, 1773.
- It was determined that the purpose of the commemoration should be to deepen EVERY citizen’s connection to the nation and to promote a more inclusive history by pushing back against efforts to cut out its uncomfortable parts.
- The next **Common Cause to All** meeting will be March 18-20, 2024.

VA250 wants to make their programs equitable and available to all parts of the Commonwealth:

- hands-on, interactive, immersive “museum on wheels”, housed in an expandable tractor-trailer available beginning in 2024 with a goal to visit every locality free of charge
- 5,000 square foot exhibition displayed at Richmond’s Virginia Museum of History and Culture and the American Revolution Museum at Yorktown throughout 2025 to 2027
 - focus on events throughout the revolutionary period
 - complementary panel exhibits available to VA locales free of charge
 - The exhibition will open in Richmond and then move to Yorktown

Localities and other non-profits may request grant money through the VA250 program as well. Grants are available from three agencies so far:

1. Virginia Tourism Corporation. The VA250 Tourism Marketing Program. These grants are designed to support, promote, and market programming, events, and interpretive signage against the backdrop of the 250th commemoration. The program is tentatively slated to open twice per year

through 2026. Round 1 and 2 have closed. Next round should be fall of 2023. Grant applications should include letters of support from the local DMO and from the VA250 Steering Committee.

2. Virginia Humanities. Virginia Humanities Grants fund content development, exhibit design, and other humanities related programs. Projects should be focused on the American Revolution and applications must include a letter of support from the VA250 Steering Committee. There is a max of \$10,000 per grant and it requires a 1:1 match on the dollar. Current round of grants will close on September 8, 2023.
3. Virginia Commission for the Arts. Creative Community Partnership Grants to arts organizations throughout the Commonwealth. Round 1 is slated to open in early 2024.

DISCUSSION:

Karen Washburn took the opportunity to ask the committee for the letter of support necessary to apply for a Virginia Humanities grant application with Tom Sasso's Youth Virginia Regiment as the non-profit applicant.

The grant's purpose is to support efforts by Lafayette 2024 Return to Portsmouth to facilitate a week-long celebration commemorating that event, including programs, interpretations, and reenactments that tell the little-known stories of:

- Lord Dunmore's Ethiopian Regiment, enslaved who fought for the British,
- 1st Rhode Island Regiment, enslaved who fought for the Patriots
- Free black Hero of the Battle of Great Bridge William Flora
- Enslaved spy James Fayette (known to history as James Armistead Lafayette).

The question was raised about whether multiple grant applications from within one locality would be acceptable. Cheryl advised that EACH GRANT ROUND one submission for each category of grant would be better received, and the committee should pay close attention when requests for support are made. Since no other organization was as far along and the committee was not ready to move

forward with its own grants, it was voted by show of hands that we would support her application.

RETURN TO PRESENTATION. Cheryl went on to say that there are a variety of events to link the country being considered. One example was a nationwide bell ringing that would spread across the country at one time. Karen informed Cheryl that the bell at Trinity Church is the same bell used to signal the British defeat and surrender at Yorktown. The bell was cracked ringing in that victory.

Cheryl also discussed the Road to Revolution program for signage and additional interpretation. Keith Toler asked how the program differed from the program Richmond offers that links historic sites related to Patrick Henry between Richmond and Yorktown. He said he was considering proposing a similar program to regional partners called River to Revolution. Cheryl explained that the Road to Revolution was the same program but will now be expanded to include other sites not related to Patrick Henry. The Civil War Trails organization has taken over Road to Revolution and will now administer the program. She felt something like River to Revolution might fit well within the program. She went on to point out free benefits to localities including customer logos, events calendar, social media amplification, and dedicated page for participating localities on the VA250 website.

She concluded her remarks by letting the committee know that VA250 was a resource for the committee, and we should feel free to reach out should we need any support.

James McCann took the floor for a presentation on Portsmouth's Revolutionary War stories. The focus was on those stories currently being interpreted and the form that interpretation took. He mentioned website, tours, events, signage, and the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard Museum. The stories he mentioned involved Billy Flora and the Battle of Great Bridge, Fort Nelson, Collier's Raid on Fort Nelson, Benedict Arnold and his defenses here in Portsmouth, General Cornwallis's occupation of the city, the Gosport (Norfolk Naval) Shipyard, and James Fayette (also known as James Armistead Lafayette). He discussed his role and responsibilities as staff liaison to the committee before opening the floor for

discussion. Specifically, he asked the group if these were the right stories, were their others, and how could we better tell them, if at all?

Dr. Newby-Alexander questioned the wording on the Gosport Shipyard State Historic Marker and suggested that it needed to be updated with better wording, specifically it needed to mention that Drydock 1 was mostly built by slaves. She also questioned why Arnold's fortifications on Glasgow Street were not mentioned on the markers. She agreed to forward a supporting archeology report.

She also said that we do not tell the story of the loyalists to the crown who fled the colonies (some even from Portsmouth) for Nova Scotia because they did not support the quest for independence.

She suggested that the Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation should consider telling the story of James Fayette in their facility.

Councilman Hugel asked what our purpose was, stating that if someone had asked him yesterday what this committee's task was, he would have said to plan the July 4th celebration in 2026 but now it had moved into a discussion about freedom from the Revolutionary War to Civil Rights. Dr. Newby-Alexander contrasted the Freedom of a Nation from governmental tyranny, with the individual freedom of its citizens, and suggested that the real story is that Freedom is in motion-both national and individual. It is constantly changing. She pointed out that America was the Great Experiment – the most ambitious of big ideas-a country made up of many cultures that can govern itself peacefully. She said our failures, and there have been many, are what make us who we are just as much as the successes. Councilman Hugel reacted positively and said he felt he was at a crossroads of Freedom (High and Court Streets).

COMMITTEE ORGANIZATION. Karen Washburn was unanimously elected to chair the committee. At the next meeting, the committee will name a vice chair and secretary. Since the committee is advisory only and has no funding, a treasurer or fiscal agent is not necessary. Due to the absence of a secretary, Keith Toler was asked to compile unofficial minutes based on his recollection of what had transpired.

Dr. Newby-Alexander suggested that sub-committees be formed to deal with the topics of signage, events, and stories, etc... Chairwoman Washburn said that would be a part of the next meeting.

FREQUENCY OF MEETINGS. The committee felt meetings should be held monthly until the group was organized and had clear objectives of what they would like to accomplish. Dr. Newby-Alexander thought that a call-in or Zoom access would be helpful.

NEXT MEETING. James will contact Drew Gruber and ask him to attend and discuss the **Road to Revolution** program. Once we have available dates from him, a date would be set for the next meeting.

SOMETHING TO CONSIDER. Not covered directly in the meeting but from the VA250 website in reference to purpose of the group in planning the commemoration.

“Susie Wilkening [presented her survey findings](#) of how Americans with different cultural and ideological values see history, the founding era, and the potential in the Semiquincentennial. She compared two large groupings of people. A “traditional” cluster that is more enthusiastic and celebratory about the 250th and who will be expecting to honor the framers, emphasizing sacrifice and conformity as a part of patriotism. Second, there is a “neoteric” (i.e., “modern”) cluster that aligns on embracing differences and change and expects the 250th to be inclusive and not focused on just the Revolutionary era. A concept important to both groups was “freedom.” Wilkening’s incisive analysis about how these museum-goer values intersect with assumptions about history will help museums and historic sites to map out strategies for creating more effective commemoration activities.”

https://va250.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/americans_history_and_the_250th_-_wilkening_consulting_research_march_2023.pdf