

Portsmouth VA 250 Committee Meeting
September 7, 2023
200 High St (suite 201),
Portsmouth, Va, 23704

Unofficial Minutes contributed by Audrey Lassiter:
Approved by Karen Washburn, Chair & James McCann, Liaison

Present: James McCann, Karen Washburn, Keith Toler, Tom Sasso, Rycy Godette, Jacqueline Johnson, Audrey Lassiter

Absent: Billie Cook, Dan Schmidt, Dr. Cassandra Newby-Alexander, Dr. Michael Hogan, Hon. Mark Hugel, Pam McKittrick, and Alexis Gardner

Mrs. Washburn, Chairperson, called the meeting to order at 10:05 am and introduced Mr. Drew Gruber.

Drew Gruber - Introduction to the “Road to Revolution” Signs

Mr. Gruber joined the meeting via Zoom. He explained to the committee that he is the Executive Director of Civil War Trails, Inc., and is responsible for the entire program from the design to administration and marketing. Since 2010 his company has been the official vendor for the “Road to Revolution” trails program. They process the applications for new sites. He recommended localities apply for the VTC VA250 Tourism Marketing Program grant to cover their \$3,000 fee. Currently, there are 14 original Road to Revolution sites, and new sites are being added to coincide with the VA 250 Initiative. Mr. Gruber added that “Road to Revolution” is not a 501c3 and has no governing body. He is creating the infrastructure, but the onus is on the localities to provide marketing as well as repair and maintenance of the signs.

Mr. Gruber explained the criteria for being considered a “Road to Revolution” site:

The placard must be able to be placed on the actual site of the historic event or in clear view of the location.

The property owner must give permission for the use of the site.

The description of the event or the personal story of a historic figure must be written in active voice and contain no more than 250 words. (The information should not be a data dump, but rather a way to inspire visitors to do more personal research or visit other local historical sites.)

The stories should represent well-rounded historical figures and events including women and African Americans, and provide insight into the historical window where the visitor is standing.

Mr. Gruber suggested the committee begin by cataloging the possible events, locations, and individual Portsmouth stories. He added that it is important to consider what will be

most relevant to the visitors, both those interested in history and those who randomly discover the sites.

He will email the VA250 Style Guide and other information needed to Mr. McCann.

Mr. Toler suggested possibly creating “Rivers to Revolution” sites which could include the surrounding cities. Mr. Gruber thought that idea was “Brilliant!”

Old Business:

Electing Vice-Chair & Secretary:

Tabled due to lack of a quorum.

Lafayette 2024 Updates:

Mrs. Washburn showed a 2-minute video created by the Lafayette 200 organization that the localities can use to promote the Bicentennial Celebration of the return tour of Major General Lafayette. She added that the actor who portrays General Lafayette is from Williamsburg, VA, and will be portraying him for the Portsmouth celebration. She added that she is submitting a \$10,000 grant application for the event. Mr. Sasso explained that there are very few re-enactors that portray the Ethiopian Regiment, and this grant will assist with providing uniforms for the group. They will be able to attend many events during the VA250 promotions.

Signage:

Mr. Toler recommended following Mr. Gruber's suggestion to begin cataloging the available sites, and then determine what would be of the most interest to tourists. He noted that Trinity Church should be on the list. He also felt that primary sources should be found for other well-known historic locations such as The Coffee Shoppe at 300 High Street (Benedict Arnold's Headquarters) and the former Bain home at 326 North Street (the original site of General Cornwallis's Portsmouth headquarters). He added that cataloging stories is also important for creating self-guided walking tours that feature the signage. Mr. Toler noted that the Virginia Historical State Highway Markers are not city-sponsored. Each marker is privately written, submitted, and paid for by the location at a cost of \$3,000.

Mr. Sasso noted that Portsmouth is actually in the center of the other localities that will be represented in the VA250. He added that unlike some other cities, Portsmouth was not burned and many of the city's historically important structures are still standing. He also explained that Portsmouth's story is more diverse because of the Ethiopian Regiment and the Queen's Rangers.

New Business & Open Discussion:

Mapping Portsmouth's VA250 Main Events:

Mr. Sasso handed out a comprehensive list of campaign-style events that mostly occurred on the south side of Hampton Roads. Mr. Toler recommended increasing the scope of the annual “Post Such as Portsmouth” event. Mr. Sasso suggested coordinating Portsmouth's events with other cities to avoid conflicts. Mr. McCann suggested some of

the other historic events could be shared in a lecture series.

Mr. Sasso explained that the “Rivers to Revolution” idea is an excellent one because the different branches of the Elizabeth River lead to several different battle locations. He also told the committee that for primary sources the book *Diary of the American War: A Hessian Journal* is a first-person account of Captain Johann Ewald's experiences. He also recommended the book *A Journal of the Operations of the Royal Queen's Rangers* from the end of the year 1777 to the conclusion of the late American War by Lieutenant-Colonel John Simcoe.

Next Meeting Dates & Times:

Mrs. Washburn suggested meeting on the second Thursday of the month at 10 am. Everyone in attendance was able to meet on Thursday, October 12, 2023.

Next Steps/Needed Resources:

Mrs. Washburn asked Mr. McCann to review the information about the traveling museum that is housed in a tractor-trailer for Ms. Godette, the Portsmouth Public School representative. Mrs. Washburn suggested Ms. Godette research how to request having the museum visit Portsmouth. Mr. Toler noted that it should be available for events that attract adults as well as students.

Mr. Toler told the committee that he and Mr. McCann will be attending the first VA250 Committee meeting in Norfolk next week. Mr. Sasso added that he will attend the Chesapeake meeting.

With no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 11:08 am.