

The 2007 Smithsonian Folklife Festival

Richard Kurin, Director, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage

Now in its forty-first year, the Smithsonian Folklife Festival continues an important tradition by featuring *Roots of Virginia Culture*, *Mekong River: Connecting Cultures*, and *Northern Ireland at the Smithsonian*.

The *Roots of Virginia Culture* program helps mark the 400th anniversary of the founding of Jamestown. The founding was a seminal event, although not for the reasons thought at the time. For the nation that subsequently emerged, Jamestown set in motion relationships among Native Americans, English, and Africans. They interacted through war, slavery, and strife, as well as through a growing economy and an unfolding democracy to define, in large measure, American culture and traditions. Musicians, artisans, cooks, boat builders, farmers, archaeologists, and genealogists from Virginia, England (mainly Kent County), West Africa, and Native communities throughout Virginia will demonstrate root traditions, cultural parallels, and the ways their expressions and those of later immigrants formed a dynamic American heritage. We are grateful for the work of many scholars and colleagues on three continents who enabled us to tell the story, and we thank our partners, including Jamestown 2007, the Kent County Council, and the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture, who supported and guided the program.

Among early immigrants to Virginia were Scots and Irish from Ireland—people who contributed mightily to the new nation. *Northern Ireland at the Smithsonian*, focuses on the cultural life of those “back home.” The Festival program comes at a very important time in the history of the island region. In just the last few months, leaders of the two major parties, Unionist (Protestant) and Republican (Catholic) have agreed to form a self-government to help surmount “The Troubles” that plagued the region. Music, crafts, occupational traditions, and culinary arts are flourishing. Cultural expressions, often means of resistance and conflict, increasingly foster understanding, reconciliation, and the economy. This is particularly evident in a massive arts effort, “Rediscover Northern Ireland,” which seeks to acquaint Americans with the region. Numerous scholars, cultural organizations (led by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Northern Ireland Arts Council), and civic-minded corporate sponsors came together to design and fund the program. Such public-private partnerships, increased American tourism, and economic investment will help guarantee reconciliation and stability.

Similar sensibilities have inspired *Mekong River: Connecting Cultures*, which brings together musicians, artisans, cooks, and other cultural exemplars from Cambodia, China, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam. The program follows the 3,000-mile river from its highland origins on the Tibetan Plateau through the Yunnan Province of China to the delta of southern Vietnam. Many Americans are familiar with the region because of war. But beyond the conflicts are rich, interrelated cultures.



Although national identities are important and persistent, ethnic communities are distributed across national boundaries. Occupational and artisanal traditions, such as fishing, farming, and weaving, transcend citizenship. Religious beliefs have inspired a wide variety of performance and celebratory expressions. This is a politically, economically, and culturally dynamic area whose future is increasingly tied to global concerns. Millions of Americans from the region now make their home in the United States—in the nation's capital, in Virginia, in Maryland, and in many other states. Americans and other visitors to the Festival will learn more about this important region thanks to the governments of Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, and Yunnan Province, China; the Rockefeller, Ford, Luce, and McKnight foundations; and institutional colleagues such as Thailand's Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre, Vietnam's Museum of Ethnology, Cambodia's Amrita Performing Arts, China Yunnan International Culture Exchange Center, and Connecticut College.

The traditions of Historic Black Universities and Colleges in Virginia include activities that link families and communities. On this evening, fathers escort daughters at the annual "Jabberwock." © 2007 Roland L. Freeman

Roland L. Freeman is very pleased to work on the Roots of Virginia Culture program because his Freeman roots go back to Hanover and Caroline counties in Virginia. This year marks the 35th anniversary of his relationship with the Smithsonian Folklife Festival as research associate and cultural documentary photographer. In his forty-year career as a visual researcher, he has created iconic photographs of African American cultural life including arabbers in Baltimore, communities in Philadelphia, and quilters and their collectors. Out of this body of work, he has published six books and exhibited all over the world. In 1991, he helped form The Group for Cultural Documentation, Inc. (www.tgcd.org) of which he is president and through which he continues his documentation of the African Diaspora.

With all three programs, the Festival continues an institutional practice of the Smithsonian and an expected part of summer life in the nation's capital. At its inception over forty years ago, the Festival was conceived as an act of cultural democracy, a vehicle for cultural conversation, and a means of cultural conservation. Held on the National Mall around the Fourth of July, it provided an important forum where Americans and others could explain, express, demonstrate, and perform their cultural traditions. "Back home," the Festival would encourage traditions within practitioners' communities; stimulate cultural research and documentation efforts; boost sales of crafts, music, and food; lead to public recognition by government leaders and the media; increase tourism and economic development; and inspire educational programs in schools. Survey after survey has demonstrated that Festival participants believe Festival programs play a key role in preserving cultural traditions in their own lives and in the lives of their communities.

The Festival model—the research and public presentation of cultural heritage with the close collaboration of those represented—has inspired university departments, programs, festivals, heritage centers, and activities within the Smithsonian, across

the United States, and around the world. The Festival provided the template for and produced several presidential inaugural programs, cultural programs for various Olympics, the Black Family Reunion, the Smithsonian's own 150th anniversary celebration, the dedication of the National World War II Memorial, and the opening of the National Museum of the American Indian. It also inspired other ongoing festivals in Michigan and Kentucky and in Romania and India.

The Festival itself is the "tip of the iceberg," the most visible part of a larger effort by the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage to safeguard cultural traditions—in an ethical and professional manner consistent with human rights—so they can flourish in a contemporary world. The Center's practice has been incorporated into the work of other Smithsonian units, including the National Museum of the American Indian, the National Museum of African American History and Culture,

The Mekong Delta is one of the most densely populated regions along the entire river. This photograph, taken in Dong Thap Province, Vietnam, shows a lively scene of workers, boats, and commerce. Photo by Nguyen Xuan Hoanh, Smithsonian Institution





the Smithsonian Latino Center, the Asian Pacific American Program, and the National Museum of American History.

The Festival, the Center, and its staff have played a key role in the development of the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, which was ratified in 2006. The treaty has now been accepted by seventy-eight member states but not, ironically, by the United States, a world leader in recognizing and promoting “cultural democracy.” While I have my own questions about the treaty, its application, efficacy, and some of its technical details, it nonetheless reflects, in part, the impact of the Festival on encouraging respect for cultural diversity around the planet.

Each August, Northern Irish crowd the streets of Ballycastle, County Antrim, to celebrate the traditional Lammas Fair. Photo courtesy Northern Ireland Tourist Board