

Africans, African Americans

and the Roots of Virginia Culture

Diana Baird N'Diaye

For African Americans, the history of Virginia has always been replete with paradox and irony. Virginia, the place where Africans first landed as slaves, was also the place where George Washington and Thomas Jefferson dreamed a nation into being around the ideal of human freedom, even though they owed their own wealth to the appropriated labor, skills, and expertise of Africans and their descendants. African Americans availed themselves of opportunities that followed upon the bloody Civil War. But after a brief period of promised prosperity came the introduction of Jim Crow laws that denied them voting rights and access to education. At the dawn of the Civil Rights era, one Virginia county closed the doors of public schools to African American students for five years. Yet, fifty years earlier, Virginia-born African American educational pioneer Booker T. Washington helped establish some of the first African American schools and colleges.

By building strong and vibrant communities (despite the difficulties of their circumstances), participating in the give-and-take of education and expression, and re-examining history in order to set the record straight, African Americans in Virginia have made a significant contribution to the commonwealth over its 400 years. Throughout Virginia's history, African Americans have come together to create and sustain communities.

Twenty-odd Angolans—the first Africans to arrive in Virginia after a torturous Atlantic journey in 1619 on the ship *Sao Joao Bautista*—called each other *malungo*, a Kimbundu word meaning “shipmate” or “companion.” Most Africans who were brought to Virginia were taken from West Africa—from the Bight of Biafra, Senegambia, and modern-day Cameroon. They spoke many different languages, including Igbo, Efik, Ijo, Wolof, Manding, and Pular. With no common language, their first challenge was inventing ways of speaking to one another and creating community.

As fluency in African languages began to fade in Virginia, some words and phrases entered American English; for example, “goober” came from the Kimbundu word for peanut (*nguba*). Replacing identities based on language and ethnic origins, bondsmen and bondswomen began to derive a sense of community from their common conditions and their recognition of cultural similarities. What emerged in the Chesapeake Bay area were regional African American identities—new forms of cultural expression that melded African aesthetics with European and sometimes Native American influences. Virginia could not have developed without the expertise, skills, and labor that Africans brought with them. African expertise in forming work groups, agriculture, tool making, and animal husbandry was indispensable to the foundation of Virginia. Early on, African Americans founded their own churches, such as the First Baptist Church in Williamsburg, one of the oldest African American churches in the state. As some bondspersons in Virginia were set free in the wills of their captors, bought their freedom, or escaped through the perilous Underground Railroad, they began to establish villages. Land ownership was the key not only to economic success, but also to building a legacy. Israel Cross, a preacher to freedmen communities in Eastern Virginia, urged his followers to “buy some land, build a home, and get some education.”



The 54-40 African American Quilters Guild of Hampton, Virginia, has been meeting to share their love of quilts and quilting for over thirty years. © 2007 Roland L. Freeman

For enslaved and free African Americans, training and education were tantamount to freedom and independence. Education and its denial became touch points in the struggle for human rights. African Virginian activists Mary Peake of Hampton and Booker T. Washington, a Hampton graduate who became head of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, helped establish not only colleges and technical institutes, but also elementary and secondary schools, such as the “Rosenwald Schools,” so called because they were partially funded through grants from Julius Rosenwald, the founder of Sears, Roebuck & Company. (Similar “whites-only” schools were created earlier throughout the segregated South.) These schools and Virginia’s Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) taught African Americans technical and agricultural skills. Today, there are five HBCUs in Virginia: Hampton University, Norfolk State University, Saint Paul’s College, Virginia State University, and Virginia Union University. Each school specializes in different academic fields, and each one is known for particular forms of expressive culture, including stepping, show bands, gospel choirs, and glee clubs.

Music is one of the strongest examples of the cultural give-and-take: There exists a 1759 written description of an instrument called a *bandore*, which Africans played in Virginia. The presence of this stringed instrument meant that among those who came to Virginia were members of the occupational class of musicians and oral historians from the Manding, Pular, and Wolof kingdoms of the Sahel region of West Africa. These skilled musicians and storytellers were called *griots*. Usually attached to courts, they sang the history and accomplishments of rulers and their families. The *bandore* of the *griots* and other similar stringed instruments (the *xalam*, *hoddu*, *ngoni*, and *gambare*) were the ancestors of the modern banjo. First an instrument of African Americans, the banjo became, for many years, an instrument associated with Appalachian music.

Enslaved musicians from the West African Senegambian region brought to Virginia the five-string *bandore*, which they played in claw hammer-style. It helped give birth to the modern-day banjo. This photograph of a young interpreter and historian, musician, and storyteller Rex Ellis, director of the historic area at Colonial Williamsburg, recalls *The Banjo Lesson*, an iconic painting by African American painter Henry Owsawa Tanner.

Photo courtesy Colonial Williamsburg

There is no area in American history, let alone colonial Virginian history, untouched by the hands of Africans and African Americans. With over half of the population of Williamsburg being of African descent, any story of America’s beginnings and life in Williamsburg devoid of the experience of enslaved Africans would be incomplete, incorrect, and anything but accurate. Men and women, free and enslaved, lived, socialized, loved, worked, suffered, survived and fought for freedom. —Rex Ellis

Historian Rex Ellis, head of the historic area at Colonial Williamsburg, stresses the importance of recognizing how, in markedly different ways, enslavers and those in bondage were negatively affected by the institution of slavery. At Colonial Williamsburg, Ellis and others have reinterpreted slavery to show the complexities of the institution. And they have humanized it with interactive, “first-person presentations” throughout the historic area.



Today, recent African immigrants to Virginia, including a large number of Somalis, build community in some of the same ways as earlier Africans did. Although many Somalis live in modern high-rises in Northern Virginia, they get together as often as possible for coffee and meet for a picnic each year in George Mason Park to share stories, songs, and traditions, such as henna hand-decoration.

Currently, farmers on both shores of the Atlantic Ocean find themselves in similar straits. Previously engaged almost exclusively in growing one cash crop, small West African peanut farmers and Virginia African American tobacco farmers stay in business by diversifying their crops, developing pesticide-free agriculture, and saving heirloom seeds. Family farms are threatened by the flight

of young people to cities and to more financially rewarding, less physically taxing occupations.

African American Virginians have become national leaders in interpreting their past and the specific cultural and historical issues that have emerged from the African/African American presence in the state. These issues include the interpretation of slavery in Virginia, the Civil War, the Civil Rights movement, and the movement for African American self-determination. Virginia's HBCUs, churches, clubs, friendly societies, and heritage organizations document and interpret their histories and educate themselves and others about African Americans' role in Virginia's history.

The first Africans to come to Virginia and their descendants contributed their expertise, artistry, labor,

Stepping traditions, which African American fraternities developed at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), now enjoy popularity among students of many cultural backgrounds. New members of Omega Psi Phi step at Hampton University. © 2007 Roland L. Freeman



EDNA LEWIS

Edna Lewis (1916–1996) was much loved in the U.S. culinary community for her mastery of southern cooking and her cookbook-memoirs about the rural foodways of her hometown, Freetown, Orange County, in the Piedmont region of Virginia. Lewis spread her love of fresh Virginia seasonal fare to new audiences as the chef at New York City's prestigious Gage and Tollner restaurant.

In her cookbook, *The Taste of Country Cooking*, originally published in 1976 and reprinted in 2007, Lewis describes growing up in Freetown, which was founded by her grandfather as a

community of farming people....The name was adopted because the first residents had all been freed from chattel slavery, and they wanted to be known as a town of Free People....The spirit of pride in community and of cooperation in the work of farming is what made Freetown a very wonderful place to grow up in.... Whenever I got back to visit my sisters and brothers, we relive old times, remembering the past. And when we share again in gathering wild strawberries, canning, rendering lard, finding walnuts, picking persimmons, making fruitcake, I realize how much the bond that held us had to do with food.

and lives to the creation of Virginia as we know it today. The impact of the Africans and their descendants is evident in the confluence of people, traditions, geography, and historical events that continue to shape Virginia's present and point to its future.

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To succeeding generations, members of West African farming communities pass on knowledge and skills that were essential to Virginia's early development. Young farmer Alioune Ba builds a fence in Ndjilassème, Senegal.

Photo by Diana N'Diaye, Smithsonian Institution



SWEET POTATO PIE *(Makes two 10-inch or three 7-inch pies)*

Reproduced here is Edna Lewis's recipe for sweet potato pie, part of her Sunday Revival Dinner menu. Lewis describes this event as "our most important social event of the summer season."

Dough

- 3 cups plus 2 tablespoons sifted flour
- 1 cup chilled, home-rendered sweet lard
- 1 scant teaspoon salt
- ½ cup cold water

Filling

- 2 cups mashed and sieved sweet potatoes
- 1 cup sugar
- ½ teaspoon cinnamon
- ½ teaspoon fresh-grated nutmeg
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 3 small or medium eggs, separated
- 2 teaspoons vanilla extract
- ¾ cup butter, melted over hot water
- 1½ cups milk, at room temperature

Two 10-inch or three 7-inch pie pans

Directions

In a mixing bowl blend well together with a pastry blender the 3 cups of flour, lard, and salt. When well blended, add cold water and mix together by hand. This is a very short dough and the water has to be incorporated in by hand. After blending the water in, shape the dough into a ball. Sprinkle the dough over with 2 tablespoons flour to make it easier to handle. Divide the dough into pieces for the number of pies to be made. Leave to rest for 10 to 15 minutes. It is best to roll the dough out after resting. It is easier to handle while soft. After rolling the dough out, place it in the pie pans, trim, cover, and set in the refrigerator or freezer until needed. Remove and fill while chilled.

In a mixing bowl combine the sieved sweet potatoes, sugar, spices, salt, beaten yolks, vanilla, and melted butter. Mix thoroughly. Add in the milk and stir well. Beat the whites of eggs to the frothy stage and stir them into the batter. Pour the batter into the pastry-lined pie pans. Bake in a 350 degree oven for 40 to 45 minutes.

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