



**Virginia American Revolution 250 Commission (VA250)
African American Advisory Council**

Virtual
Tuesday, May 21, 2024
1:00pm

NOTES

Members present:

The Honorable Mamie E. Locke, *Chair, Senate of Virginia*
Dr. Edward L. Ayers, *President Emeritus, University of Richmond*
Dr. Nathaniel L. (NL) Bishop, *SVP and Chief Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Officer, Carillion Clinic*
Connie Matthews Harshaw, *Board President, Let Freedom Ring Foundation, First Baptist Church*
Professor Ervin Jordan, *Associate Professor and Research Archivist, University of Virginia*
Dr. Maureen Elgersman Lee, *Bray School Lab Director, William & Mary*
Rev. William Lee, *Pastor, Loudoun Ave. Christian Church (LACC) (ret.)*
Patrice Lewis, *Government Affairs Manager, Gentry Locke Attorneys*
Rita McClenny, *President and CEO, Virginia Tourism Corporation*
Dr. Cassandra Newby-Alexander, *Prof. of Virginia Black History and Culture, Norfolk State University*
Phyllis Terrell, *Director of Communications, Fort Monroe*
Dr. Vanessa Thaxton-Ward, *Director, Hampton University Museum*
Cainan Townsend, *Executive Director, Robert Russa Moton Museum*
James Warren, *Founder and CEO, Share More Stories, JMI Vice President of Brand Strategy*
Major General Cedric T. Wins, *Superintendent, Virginia Military Institute*
Richard Dickerson, *Vice President of Let Freedom Ring Foundation*
Patricia Mullett, *Director of Communications for Lt. Gov. Winsome Sears*

VA250 Leadership and Staff

Carly Fiorina, *VA250 National Honorary Chair*
Cheryl Wilson, *Executive Director*
Katherine Dabney, *Development & Engagement Associate*
Kate Egner Gruber, *Director of Engagement, Public Programming, & Interpretation*
Korin Taddei, *Executive Assistant*
Alton Coston, III, *VA250 Emerging Leaders Fellow*
Frank Sadler, *Chief of Staff to Carly Fiorina*

Call to Order – 1:05pm

The Honorable Mamie Locke, Chair

- Chair Mamie Locke welcomed Vice President of Let Freedom Ring Foundation, Richard Dickerson, to the meeting
- Chair Mamie Locke mentioned having an upcoming meeting with the local Hampton VA250 committee on Thursday, May 23 to reconvene on any outstanding tasks. Chair Mamie Locke also said that she would provide information to VA250's leadership regarding information on a Juneteenth event happening on Sunday, June 16th at Mill Point Park in Hampton, VA.

Chair's Remarks and Introductions

VA250 National Honorary Chair, Carly Fiorina

- VA250 National Honorary Chair Carly Fiorina thanked Senator Mamie Locke for chairing the committee and for assisting in the July 4th programming for this year and 2025. Chair Carly Fiorina mentioned that VA250 is looking forward to continually working with Senator Mamie Locke and the African American Advisory Council to ensure programming reflects their desires.
 - Then, Chair Fiorina mentioned that there are two major events heading towards us: 1) Juneteenth and 2) Fourth of July.
 - In all events that VA250 has the pleasure of being a part of, Chair Fiorina re-emphasized the goals are to educate, engage, and inspire every community across the Commonwealth in doing their part to create a more perfect union.
 - Chair Fiorina said that she’s looking forward to seeing what the African American Advisory Council decides regarding the drummers (Black drummers, Native American drummers, and Fife and Drum to begin the formal evening program)
- Lastly, Chair Fiorina asked the following question to the committee:
 - Q: What role, if any, if you would like VA250 Leadership to play in Juneteenth?
 - If there are any preparation efforts necessary, VA250 is more than happy to assist.

VA250: Update on July 4 program at Virginia State Capitol

Cheryl Wilson

- Cheryl Wilson said that the July 4th evening programming will hold two parts: 1) the Square Fair (5-7pm) which will hold “every measure of human expression” (food, dance, music, and arts) by having pop-up tents and family-friendly activities.
 - There will also be a larger tent for performances as well (readings, talks, etc.)
- And 2) The Grand Ceremony on the State Capitol’s Portico
 - The ceremony will begin with a drum trio between African-American drummers, Native American drummers, and the Fife and Drum (from Colonial Williamsburg).
 - The theme of the event is “What does Freedom Mean to You?”
 - The event will also showcase music from the Norfolk Symphony, Gospel choirs, and other musical talents.
 - Governor Glenn Youngkin, Speaker of the House Don Scott, and VA250 Chairs Senator Mamie Locke and Delegate Terry Austin, and Chief Stephen Adkins *will all speak during the evening ceremony on the Portico.*
- Cheryl mentioned that there would be a private reception happening at 6:15pm within the Capitol for members of both the African American and Tribal Nations Leadership Advisory Council.
 - At approximately 9pm, the close of the evening event will end with a grand finale display over the State Capitol.
- Cheryl emphasized that this is solely Act 1 of a multiple act play.
- Carly said that the Master of Ceremonies will be Geoff Bennett (co-anchor at PBS NewsHour) to guide the event along.

VA250 Emerging Leadership Fellow Community Conversations

Alton Coston

- VA250 Emerging Leaders Fellow Alton Coston provided an update on his “*Community Conversations*”
 - Alton mentioned that the “*Community Conversations*” are opportunities to speak with and interview Black American citizens across the Commonwealth to understand their desires/thoughts for July 4th programming and freedom more generally to hone the programming occurring at the State Capitol. Alton’s interviews are recorded with the interviewee’s permission for future reference for the commission.

- Alton began his presentation by playing a portion of one of his interviews with a community member explaining his thoughts on the July 4th programming and mobile museum – where the interviewee emphasized that all July 4th programming must be authentic and come from a perspective of greatness.
 - The interview questions were as follows:
 - 1) From visiting our 1,100 square-foot mobile museum, what key-takeaways should visitors learn and know about African Americans and their experiences during the American Revolution?
 - 2) How can we ensure that all Virginians, including people of African descent, see themselves and are included in our July 4 programming at the State Capitol?
 - 3) As we continue working together to craft engaging, inspiring, and educational programming throughout our commemorative season, from your perspective, what stories do we tell, and how do we best tell them?

- Alton then described that his target interview audience consisted of anyone who identifies as African-American in the Commonwealth (Middle/High School Students, Educators, Community Organizers, Policy/General Assembly Staff, Professors, and Deans of Virginia Universities)
 - Lastly, Alton summarized 5 qualities that African-American citizens of the Commonwealth desire in July 4th programming based on his 12 Community Conversations:
 - 1) Authenticity
 - 2) Empowerment
 - 3) Solution-Based
 - 4) Touches All Subsets of Black Americans, not just a specified few
 - 5) Cultural/Community Organizations at the Square Fair
 - Richard Dickerson mentioned that the Advisory Council and VA250 have a huge opportunity in easing political polarization during this event – especially if we focus on individuals and social groups who aren't in the planning phases.
 - Richard mentioned there are approximately 3 million Black people within the a few miles of Williamsburg, and we must ensure those individuals are involved/knowledgeable of our efforts.

- Alton was then asked if individuals knew of VA250's existence before he began the interviews.
 - Alton mentioned that majority of the individuals that he interviewed were not aware of VA250's existence nor that the July 4th programming was occurring. Alton said that individuals who worked proximate to the General Assembly (policy staff, bill testifiers, etc.) were aware of VA250, but the overwhelming majority did not.

- Richard then mentioned that he hopes the commission and Advisory Council manages the expectations of opinions captured during the community conversations. Additionally, Richard mentioned that we must not only look at the past 250 years ago, but we also must showcase how our work is relevant to modern times.

- A member of the committee mentioned that Pennsylvania 250 (PA250) and other states have begun advertising widespread 250 marketing campaign by having the Governor announce them.
 - VA250 National Chair Fiorina mentioned that while America 250 and PA250 is making a lot of noise, VA250 is substantively head of them. Nevertheless, VA250 has yet to complete a full-fledged marketing campaign yet and it's beginning to be that time.

- Patrice Lewis asked Cheryl if there was a list of community groups that may be a part of the 4th of July programming and Square Fair

- Cheryl answered that there are currently 15 groups that have committed to the Square Fair including dancing and community groups. Cheryl also mentioned that Chair Locke connected the commission with a Gospel choir, and Alton would be assisting in securing more cultural vendors.
- Rita McClenny mentioned that James Warren’s Share More Stories could help with the advertising campaign. Rita also mentioned that “virginia.org/blackhistory” has lists of famous Black Virginians that could be phenomenal to display/share.

General Updates

- Chair Mamie Locke re-emphasized the themes of authenticity and inclusion. Chair Locke also asked about any updates on the Bray School in Williamsburg, VA.
 - Maureen said that the Bray School is moving along well and they’re looking for a late fall opening of the building’s new location.
 - On the research side, there is currently an architectural dig on the current site to receive as many artifacts as possible.
 - Additionally, SWEM Library platform has several Bray School resources (including oral histories)
 - A publication of some of the Bray School’s artifact findings is forthcoming – with 50% of those reflections written by descendant community.
- Phyllis Terrell mentioned the **African Landing Commemoration happening the weekend of Thursday, August 22nd through Saturday, August 24th at Fort Monroe.**
 - In this commemoration, they’ll be blending soils from Angola, Virginia Native Tribes, and England, ultimately representing the blending of the three cultures that occurred in 1619.
 - Saturday will be big commemorative event and the entire weekend will be full of commemoration, reconciliation, and healing
- James Warren mentioned that we must ensure individuals are aware that the July 4th event is occurring – and that we’re no longer in a space where we can solely focus on the product, we must ensure that individuals know the event exists. James also re-emphasized telling African-American stories from a perspective of empowerment.

Final Thoughts

- Cassandra Newby-Alexander asked the following question: “As we discuss this commemoration, have we thought about what freedoms meant to several diverse groups?”
 - Ensure that the storylines are inclusive instead of being an add-on
 - When Cassandra went to a Yorktown Battle reenactment, there were no African Americans in the reenactment, but African Americans were very much a part of that battle. Wants to ensure that Black British/Revolutionary soldiers are also a part of the story.
- Cheryl said that there won’t be another African Advisory meeting before July 4th, but is open to having another one if the Council wishes.
 - Additionally, Cheryl said that they’ll continue to hear about and inform the Advisory Council about additional participants for Square Fair.
 - Cheryl also mentioned an all-state meeting in June

NEXT STEPS:

- Determine if the African American Advisory Council wants another meeting before July 4th

- Chair Mamie Locke said that she would provide information to VA250's leadership (Cheryl and Carly) regarding information on a Juneteenth event happening on Sunday, June 16th at Mill Point Park in Hampton, VA.
- Phyllis Terrell mentioned that she would be willing to send VA250's leadership additional details on Fort Monroe's African Landing Commemoration happening the weekend of Thursday, August 22nd through Saturday, August 24th.
- The African American Advisory Council may want to determine what role, if any, VA250 plays in Juneteenth programming occurring in their respective communities happening in several weeks.
- Chair Mamie Locke mentioned that VA250 may want to provide more marketing/advertising assistance to local VA250 committees to ensure that Black American citizens know that VA250 and its July 4th programming exists (Cheryl and Kate)
- The overwhelming consensus among the group is to begin a more widespread intentional, marketing strategy among the Commonwealth to ensure that African-American citizens know that the July 4th event is occurring
- James Warren's Share More Stories could be a group that can be a huge help in this regard

Many members from the Council suggested that we must find nonprofit and community organizations to participate in the Square Fair to ensure all voices are involved and included.

Meeting Adjourned

Chair Locke adjourned the meeting adjourned at 1:57pm.