

## **Jim Crow Lives Here: Race Relations in Virginia, 1863-1954**

NEH Grant Proposal

Amy Benjamin

### **List of Project Participants:**

Amy Benjamin; Project Director; MA student at George Mason University

Research Assistants; not yet hired; BA or MA history students at George Mason University

Dr. Jennifer Ritterhouse; Advisory Board, Professor of History at George Mason University

Dr. Sharon Leon; Advisory Board, Director of Public Projects at the Center for History and New Media

### **Abstract**

Scholars of the American Civil Rights Movement typically focus on the dramatic and, often, violent episodes of segregation and integration in the Deep South after 1955, forgetting events that occurred elsewhere or earlier in time. The relationship between Virginia's white and African-American citizens is one that evolved more peacefully, though no less significantly, from the Emancipation Proclamation to the *Brown v. Board* decision. This project, titled "Jim Crow Lives Here: Race Relations in Virginia, 1863-1954" will provide contextualized scholarship on events of segregation, white supremacy and black activism in Virginia from 1863 to 1954. Digitized images, newspaper articles, and documents will enhance the audience's understanding of Virginia's race relations during this time. Presented both thematically and chronologically, this project is intended to reach a wide audience of interested browsers to scholars and teachers.

## Narrative

### *Enhancing the humanities*

Virginia has a long and complicated history of racial oppression and integration. America's first African-American slaves were brought to Virginia's shores in 1619. Over two centuries later, the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation and the 1865 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment freed all persons held as slaves. This marked a new period of white and black relations, one that was fraught with uncertainty about how to manage race relations. Virginia's legislature passed rigid laws to ensure that blacks and whites stayed in separate realms. The 1902 state constitution completely disenfranchised black voters with measures like poll taxes and literacy tests. Two notorious acts passed in the 1920s that were the most specific segregation laws in the entire country. The Racial Integrity Act forbade interracial marriage and the Public Assemblages Act mandated the segregation of whites and blacks in areas of public entertainment like movie theaters and dance halls.

Virginia was also the site of some of the most significant achievements in the struggle for civil rights. Samuel Tucker led a sit-in protest at Alexandria's public library in 1939. In 1944, a full decade before Rosa Parks sparked the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Irene Morgan, a young black woman living in Roanoke, Virginia helped to desegregate the interstate bus system when she refused to give up her seat to a white person. Seven years later, in 1951, sixteen-year old Barbara Johns persuaded the entire student body of 450 to walk out of Moton High School in Farmville in protest against inadequate educational facilities. Later the case became part of the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision.

Douglas Southall Freeman, the editor of the *Richmond News Leader* in the 1920s and 1930s, argued that the "Virginia Way" of race relations meant that whites and blacks led lives of "separation by consent." Both races agreed to segregation, so long as whites provided blacks with basic services and blacks sought redress of grievances through channels deemed appropriate by whites. Virginia's white elite citizens who controlled the legislature and other powerful community organizations eschewed the terrorist tactics and violence of the Ku Klux Klan. They firmly believed in segregation and the inferiority of the black race but felt that paternalistic practices towards blacks resulted in peaceful and successful race relations.<sup>1</sup> In the years following WWI, African-Americans refused to continue buying into this system and cracks appeared in the veneer of Virginia's racial harmony.<sup>2</sup>

Lacking the dramatic and horrific scenes of lynching, murder and violence of race relations in the Deep South, Virginia is too often overlooked as a center for rich study of the struggle for black equality. Furthermore, the period of time from 1863 to 1954 is often presented as a rather static period of history with little activism from the black community and uniform efforts

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<sup>1</sup> J. Douglas Smith, *Managing White Supremacy: Race, Politics and Citizenship in Jim Crow Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 3-4.

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix A for a biography about Virginia's race relations.

on the part of whites to establish oppressive laws. In fact, there are many instances of black activism and white communities often presented varied opinions on the best way to manage race relations. "Jim Crow Lives Here: Race Relations in Virginia, 1863-1954" seeks to bring Virginia's forgotten racial history out of the shadows.

The goal of "Jim Crow Lives Here" is to bring about awareness and provide scholarship of some of the lesser-known instances of white supremacy, Jim Crow laws and black activism within Virginia's post-Emancipation history. Few analog or digital studies study this important topic. We request a Level II Start Up grant to build this website. The finished product will be a website that will present these events thematically and chronologically. Websites have ample opportunity to relay information in a contextual and visual manner, allowing a better understanding of these events as occurrences that happened in relation to one another, not isolation. Visitors will be able to examine instances of codified segregation and discrimination alongside events of protest and opposition by blacks working towards equality.

"Jim Crow Lives Here" will appeal to multiple audiences. Interested history buffs will learn something new as they tread through the exhibit pages. Students of history will find detailed, scholarly information complete with sources on events they were previously unaware. Teachers in the commonwealth will find a source of knowledge that will enrich the basic and often vague standards required by local and state curriculum.

The opening page of "Jim Crow Lives Here" will feature tiles of the faces and places of Virginia's significant race relation's history. Clicking on an image tile on the homepage will take the user to a page with an overview of information related to that event. The casual browser might stay on the first page scanning through text and images while a more curious visitor can click an option for more and learn about the event in greater detail. The second page will also contain a list of sources on the topic. Within these exhibit pages, a static menu on the left hand side will provide a chronology of events to allow for visual contextualization. A menu across the top will give users access to thematic buttons that will include "Activism," "White Supremacy," "Places," and "People."

### ***Environmental scan***

Jim Crow laws, black codes and the Civil Rights Movement have been the subject of many studies, books and digital projects. However, many of these projects tend to focus on the states of the Deep South where famous episodes of the Civil Rights movement garnered national attention. Virginia's racial history is replete with rigid laws and practices alongside moments of rare, early activism from the black communities. There is currently no project that begins at Emancipation and ends at the Brown v. Board decision. Furthermore, Virginia's role in the long struggle for equality is often left out of other Civil Right Movement projects.

The Virginia Historical Society's *Civil Rights Movement in Virginia* digital exhibit was created to accompany a physical exhibit of the same title in 2004 at the organization's Richmond, Virginia location. The online exhibit's sixteen pages provide a quick overview of Virginia's Jim Crow laws

and civil rights achievements from 1866 to the 1970s. While *Civil Rights Movement in Virginia* depicts a handful of events and sets them against a wider national context, “Jim Crow Lives Here” will provide more in-depth information about events and legislation during a shorter period of time that most of the public and even scholars are less familiar with.

The Virginia Foundation for the Humanities’ *Encyclopedia of Virginia* contains hundreds of entries with detailed information about events, people, and places of Virginia’s past. Because it is set up like an online encyclopedia and feels similar to Wikipedia, there is little contextualization within the commonwealth’s or national history. “Jim Crow Lives Here” will overcome the weaknesses of *Encyclopedia of Virginia* because it will integrate the people, places, and events in a thematic and chronological organization.

The digital tools used to create the site are already in existence. Omeka, an open source content management system is designed to display photos and text as exhibitions. The site will use Omeka’s Simple Pages, Exhibit Builder and Search functions to provide a look and feel that will allow optimal ease of use.

### ***History and Duration of the Project***

Project Director Amy Benjamin has been involved with the research on Virginia’s role in the Long Civil Rights Movement since the fall of 2014. She began her research with a paper that examined the white and black opposition to the Public Assemblages Act of 1926, a law that mandated whites and blacks be segregated in public spaces. Her interest in developing a website around the larger topic of Virginia’s role in white supremacy and black activism came from a realization that most Virginians do not understand their history and are unaware of the heroic acts of protest, some decades before the national Civil Rights Movement gained momentum, or the extremist views that once existed in the state.

This website will need at least eighteen months of work. At that point, the Project Director will assess the success and quality of the work. Future development of the site might include expanding its bank of digitized primary sources that relate to the events discussed on its exhibit pages.

### ***Work Plan***

We request Level II Start-Up funds to support 18 months of work.

Phase One (8 months Sept. 2015-April 2016): Collection and Research

- Compile research on acts of white supremacy and black activism in Virginia from 1863-1954; include scholarly sources
- Collect digitized photographs, documents, newspaper articles, etc. that help tell the story for each event. Complete detailed metadata entries for each item.

Phase Two (6 months May 2016- Oct. 2016): Exhibit Building

- Organize research and digitized items into exhibits using Omeka’s Exhibit Builder

- Divide each exhibit into two pages. The first page allows casual browsers an overview of the event and the second page continues in more depth and provides sources.

Phase Three (4 months February 2017 ): Testing and Final Product Dissemination

- Conduct beta-testing with at least ten users who represent different audiences. Elicit feedback from each of these users and incorporate this feedback into the project. Testing will ensure that the site is user-friendly and appealing to both casual visitors and scholars.

### ***Staff***

The project is led by Project Director Amy Benjamin, a graduate student at George Mason University. Benjamin will be responsible for overall project management, content research, exhibit design and beta testing.

She will be joined by two upper-level undergraduate or junior graduate student research assistants. These assistants, not yet hired, will assist with the scholarly research for the project. They will be assigned various events to research and will be responsible for writing research content and providing citations.

The project will be reviewed by an advisory board consisting of George Mason University faculty members. Dr. Jennifer Ritterhouse, who specializes in race relations in the American South during the post-Reconstruction era, will review the site's content for accuracy and historiographical trends. Dr. Sharon Leon, Director of Public Projects at the Center for History and New Media, will provide feedback on the user interface, Omeka software use and other technological concerns. The Advisory Board will communicate with the Project Director through email or personal face-to-face meetings.

### **Final Product Dissemination**

The final product will be a dynamic, visually appealing and easy to use website that will allow visitors to explore episodes of white supremacy and black activism in a way that is not available now. Few books and no current digital projects cover such a broad topic with this specific time frame. Additionally, the website will allow for visual contextualization and rich banks of related images and documents.

The website will be hosted at the Project Director's personal site, <http://www.amybenjamin.org/omeka>. Once it is complete in its final form, the URL will likely change to reflect the content of the site.

In order to attract visitors to the site, the Project Director will try to connect with organizations that might display the site on their social media pages and Twitter feeds.

These organizations would include but are not limited to:

- Library of Virginia
- Virginia Historical Society
- The Southern Poverty Law Center

- President Lincoln's Cottage
- Alexandria Black History Museum
- Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture
- Birmingham Civil Rights Institute

## Appendix A

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