



'Read me a story!'



Read-along program advances child literacy » Article, page D1

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Mask opt-outs expanded

School staff allowed to go without; trustees change exposure guidelines

On Friday, an Arlington County circuit court judge issued a temporary order blocking Gov. Glenn Youngkin from enforcing his mask-optional executive order against schools.

Three days later, the Mecklenburg County School Board expanded its protocols by allowing teachers and staff to go without masks if they so choose. Trustees made other changes to school COVID policies at a special call meeting Monday.

Previously, the School Board voted to make mask-wearing optional for students provided a parent or guardian signs an au-

thorization form allowing the student to forego masks. Mask-wearing continues to be mandatory on school buses and in cars under separate health rules enforced by the National Transportation Safety Administration.

Students also are required to wear masks when attending a school-related event in a location where it is required.

At the Feb. 7 special meeting, with Rob Campbell absent, the School Board voted 6-2 to expand the mask-optional policy.

Under the new rules, students can still forego masking, except while riding the

bus, if the parents provide a signed authorization. Now, teachers and staff can also go maskless if they desire.

The original policy did not apply to teachers or school staff.

Teachers will not be allowed to segregate their students based on their mask-wearing preference. Superintendent of Schools Paul Nichols made clear that there should be no discrimination against students who either do or don't wear a mask.

At the request of MCPS Nursing Su-

See MASKS, page A5

Chase City eyes traffic curbs for data center

To clear way for Microsoft expansion, railroad asks to shut down crossings

The Town of Chase City is considering a request from Buckingham Branch Railroad to close off traffic on three streets where the company's railroad crossings are located to facilitate the construction of a new Microsoft cloud computing data center.

The closings would take place at Railroad Avenue, on a dirt road near the Chase City town garage at 4th Street, and on East B Street near the intersection with Railroad Avenue.

Town Manager Dusty Forbes said a traffic study found that the roads near the three crossings are not heavily traveled — there is negligible traffic on the dirt road, the vehicle count is 180 at the B Street crossing and 28 vehicles on Railroad Avenue.

Forbes said the tentative plan is to block the crossing sites by installing guardrails on either side of the tracks along the roads.

The railroad's request came after the Dillwyn-based short-line railroad company entered into discussions with Microsoft and Mecklenburg County to add a new crossing near S. Main Street.

That would provide access to a 584-acre site where Microsoft plans to build a new data center.

Microsoft Corporation purchased the property from Mac Bailey in October at a cost of \$3.8 million.

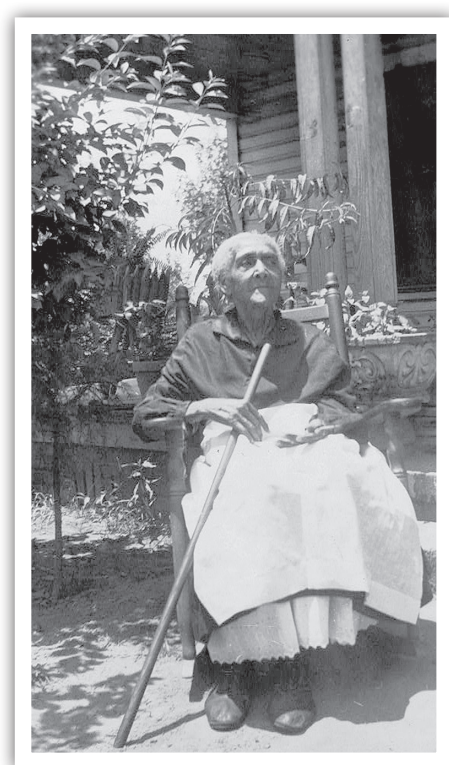
Forbes told Chase City Town Council at a special called meeting on Mon-

See DATA, page A5

LOVE BEFORE FREEDOM



Courtney and Alexandria Schroeder jumping the broom at their wedding in La Jolla, California, November 2020. © Alexandria Schroeder



Mrs. Tempie Herndon Durham (1834-1937). Durham, North Carolina. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

This is Black History Month

In the first article of this four-part series during History Month, we learn that Carter G. Woodson (1875-1950) is named the "Father of Black History" and a "son of Southside Virginia." Dr. Woodson designated the month of February for celebrating African American history.

Valentine's and Black history: Love, marriage and 'jumping the broom'

By ANGELITA REYES
Special to The Sun

African Americans have a rich history," says the Honorable Glanzy M. Spain, Jr., vice chairman of the Mecklenburg County Board of Supervisors. "Our foremothers and forefathers went through much struggle. We have to reminisce and give thanks to our past." Giving thanks pays homage to succeeding generations who continue to stand on the shoulders of history's giants.

Despite that heritage of relentless struggle, there are also many stories about love

in African American history. Popular marketing culture promotes Valentine's Day as a time for romantic love expressed with gifts such as chocolates, wine, and flowers. Valentine's Day is also a celebration and expression of "self-love, self-care, strengthening relationships with family and friends, and loving others." The all-encompassing celebration of love on Valentine's Day parallels the sentiments and expressions of Black History Month.

There are many noteworthy stories about different forms of love portrayed in slave narratives (online via the Library of Congress), novels, testimonies, historical

accounts, and autobiographies by African Americans. Their stories indicate timeless devotions of romance, love, and commitment. For example, oral testimonies from once-enslaved African Americans collected by the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration (later renamed the Work Projects Administration and known as the WPA) are marvelous pieces of history — African American history. What might a first-person account of love and marriage sound like from an African American woman who was once enslaved?

See VALENTINE'S, page A6

Job growth picks up at end of 2021

Job creation was strong throughout Southside Virginia in December, according to the latest local jobs report issued by the Virginia Employment Commission on Wednesday.

Mecklenburg, Brunswick, Charlotte, Lunenburg, and Pittsylvania counties all added jobs to the economy and the counties saw an uptick in the number of available workers.

Mecklenburg County's labor force grew by 110 and the number of jobs by 125 between November and December, Brunswick added 98 workers and 42 jobs, Charlotte 48 workers and 56 jobs, Lunenburg 13 workers and 23 jobs and Pittsylvania 43 workers and 113 jobs.

Except for Brunswick, each of the counties saw the number of first-time unemployment claims drop — Mecklenburg's claims total was down by 15,

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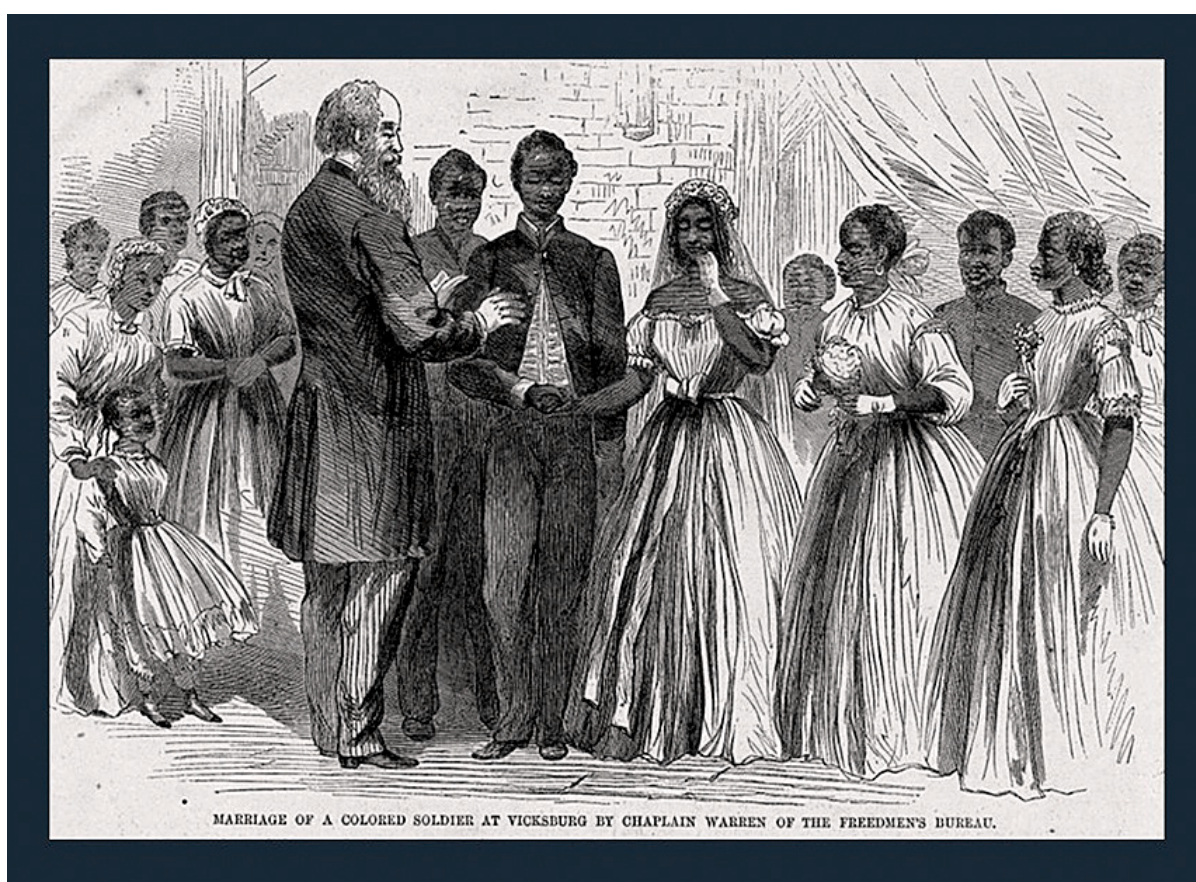
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BLACK HISTORY MONTH

This is the second of four articles on African American history and culture during February, Black History Month. Dr. Angelita D. Reyes is founder and president of Literacy InterActives, Inc., a 501(c)(3) and proud sponsor of the Parker Sydnor historic preservation project located in Mecklenburg County. For more on the project visit <https://literacyinteractives.org/>

Right: “Marriage of a Colored Soldier at Vicksburg by Chaplain Warren of the Freedmen’s Bureau.” Vicksburg, Mississippi, 1866. This illustration appeared in the June 30, 1866 edition of Harper’s Weekly. The original drawing was made by the artist Alfred R. Waud (1828-1891). (Courtesy of the Library of Congress)



VALENTINE’S

From page A1

One hot summer day in August 1937, 103-year-old Tempie Herndon Durham (1834-1938) sat in her small, blooming garden in the front of her house at 1312 Pine St. in Durham, North Carolina. She was being interviewed by Travis Jordan, a field worker from the WPA Federal Writers’ Project. He was collecting oral testimonies of formerly enslaved African Americans in North Carolina. Born enslaved, Mrs. Durham was now a freed-woman and the interviewer asked questions about her life before the Civil War.

In responding to the interviewer’s questions, Mrs. Durham speaks lovingly about life with her husband, Exeter Durham, whom she had married during slavery. She recalls her wedding day on the plantation (translated from the vernacular transcription), “Exeter made me a wedding ring. He made it out of a big red button with his pocket knife. He cut it round and polished it so smooth that it looked like a red satin ribbon tied around my finger. That was such a pretty ring. I wore it for about fifty years...” Tears filled the elderly woman’s eyes as she remembers her beloved husband who died many years ago.

Mrs. Durham appears to have a sharp memory and she’s exceedingly proud about the polished red wedding ring and about the wedding festivities held on the porch of the plantation “big house.” Not only does she remember that “Marse George and Miz Betsy,” joined the festivities, but she describes how there was a “Negro preacher” that married them; and she and her husband also “jumped over the broomstick.” The African American tradition of jumping the broom represents sanctioning the marriage.

What kind of marriages occurred for African Americans during bondage? Under the laws of slavery enslaved women and men could not legally marry. Like Mrs. Durham, however, African Americans embraced the vows of holy matrimony and were deemed “married” within the enslaved community. In other words, it was the community’s recognition of the marriage that ultimately sanctioned the union.

Enslaved women and men were considered property and the slaveholder could remove them from their “marital” existence by sale, kidnapping, plantation dowries, inheritance, or property transfers. Hence, traditional religious vows of matrimony bestowed upon enslaved couples at the threshold of the wedding ceremony, “until death do us part” was a euphemism for “or until we are sold” away from each other — permanently. In some instances,

African American preachers performing the wedding ceremony would intone “until distance do you part” or “until anyone is removed” as references to the prophetic reminder of the rule of slave law. Their “cover ups” with words dispelled the unforgiving reality about the couple’s union. Both marriage as the institution and wedding as the ceremony were among the countless human contradictions that existed in chattel slavery.

Why were enslaved African Americans denied legal marriage? Marriage as a legal contract between an enslaved woman and man was incompatible with the absolute power of the slaveholder. Through benevolence, practicality, irony, or even mockery, slaveholders allowed enslaved women and men to be “married” and sometimes have wedding ceremonies. Let’s return to Mrs. Durham’s story. She and her beloved husband happily jumped the broom. What are the origins of jumping the broom?

Popular media sources indicate that jumping the broom was a wedding ritual practice that originated in Africa and brought to the American colonies via the transatlantic slave trade. The practice didn’t come from Africa. Definitely, no jumping the broom practices existed in marriage customs and rituals among traditional African societies. In precolonial African societies, the marriage ceremony was a highly formalized sacred rite representing a far-reaching religious worldview that honored the ancestral past, the extended community of the present, and the generations waiting in the future.

Throughout Africa, elaborate and lengthy ceremonies included days of prolonged speechmaking, feasting, music, dancing, and the exchange of impressive gifts. The ordinary household broom had no ceremonial role. Traditional wedding celebrations symbolized and sustained economic, social, and cultural “contracts” or allegiances involving entire families and communities. The brevity and simplicity of jumping the broom as a ritual for sanctioning marriage originated from an entirely different place.

The transcultural practice of jumping the broom or the “besom wedding” has its origins in Welsh, Celtic and Roma cultural practices in the British Isles. “Besom” (broom) weddings or “nonchurch” or “irregular” weddings were still performed during the 18th and 19th centuries and known about, if not practiced as a folk ritual among various poor working-classes. The broom stick wedding was a “ritual reserved for ethnic pariahs and other marginal groups,” says Tyler D. Parry, author

of *Jumping the Broom: The Surprising Multicultural Origins of a Black Wedding Ritual*. Coming from these geographical areas, indentured servants first arrived in America in the decade following the settlement of Jamestown by the Virginia Company in 1607. They brought the multicultural folk marriage practice of jumping the broom to the American colonies.

While Indigenous lands were being taken over by the colonists, there was an unpredicted socializing of indentured servants with newly enslaved Africans. Indentured servants and enslaved Africans observed, exchanged or combined cultural practices. By the 1670s, enslaved Africans had begun to replace White indentured servants among Virginia’s landed gentry. Besom traditions survived and thrived on the plantations and settler farms providing a unique cultural diffusion among multicultural and racial groups in the American colonies as slavery became the rule of law. By the 18th century slavery was legal throughout the Thirteen Colonies.

With its cross-cultural and working-class origins in the British Isles, jumping the broom became a culturally appropriated marriage ritual among in the American colonies. Out of cultural and ritual

contacts with folk practices connected to indentured servitude, jumping the broom gained a new identity associated with African Americans.

Refusing to surrender to the illegality and denunciation of the slave’s marriage, enslaved African Americans endorsed and recognized their marriages as cultural, moral, and spiritual unions. With the determination of the heart and love for kinship that would bring about future generations, they carried their sentiments about the strengths of love and marriage into freedom. They unconsciously advanced a human rights belief that the freedom to marry is one of the most fundamental rights of citizenship and humanity’s capacity to love — regardless. We witness modern-day heterosexual, multicultural, LGBTQ, and interracial couples who jump the broom at their wedding celebrations in order to honor the integrity of enslaved African Americans who jumped the broom on the antebellum plantations.

The renowned poet and civil rights activist, Maya Angelou (1928-2014) tells us, “Love recognizes no barriers. It jumps hurdles, leaps fences, penetrates walls to arrive at its destination full of hope.” To everybody, Happy Valentine’s Day!

Did you know?

Mae Jemison (b. 1956) is an engineer, physician, and former NASA astronaut. She became the first Black woman to travel into space when she served as a mission specialist aboard the Space Shuttle Endeavour. Dr. Jemison joined NASA’s astronaut corps in 1987 and was selected to serve for the STS-47 mission. She orbited the earth for nearly eight days on September 12–20, 1992. Dr. Jemison has written several books for children and appeared in an episode of Star Trek: The Next Generation.

