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County banks tax windfall on vehicles

Mecklenburg County residents will see no relief this year from higher bills for personal property taxes on vehicles.

On Monday, the Board of Supervisors agreed to spend the county's personal property tax windfall, which currently stands at \$1.1 million, on schools and emergency medical services.

Board members decided to earmark the money for county ser-

Rising car prices result in higher personal property tax bills, yielding \$1.1 million extra revenue for schools, rescue services

vices, rather than issue refunds to taxpayers, as the county braces for several unfunded mandates coming down from the General Assembly this year. The tax windfall also will help Mecklenburg County absorb the cost

of taking over the operations of rescue squads in Clarksville and Chase City, a change driven by the steady depletion of volunteer manpower for county emergency services (see related story, below).

The higher tax bills for many county residents have resulted despite no increase in Mecklenburg County's personal property tax rate. The rising levies stem from higher tax assessments on vehicles now on the road, ex-

plained Commissioner of Revenue Ed Taylor in comments to the Board of Supervisors in September.

A shortage of new and used vehicles for sale has resulted in inflated prices and higher tax valuations for vehicles in current use, which in turn has driven up personal property tax bills, said Taylor.

See TAX, page A6

HISTORY MADE AT HOME

For the first generation of freed African Americans, the breakthrough of owning land

By ANGELITA REYES
Special to The Sun

With the celebration of Black History Month in February, this ongoing series has highlighted the contributions of extraordinary and ordinary individuals. Many of us are familiar with African American women and men who have made exceptional contributions to history — and there are thousands of African Americans who are honored and remembered for their achievements in the United States and the world. In addition to nationally known figures, local communities also contain their own history-makers.

One "ordinary" history-maker from Southside Virginia is Lovice "Vickey" Skipwith (1856-1936), who created a home place for her family that would embody the themes of struggle, refuge, survival, and perseverance at the dawning of freedom well into the 20th century. She bought six acres of farmland in Mecklenburg County that had been a part of Prestwold Plantation. You may wonder, "What's so unusual for a woman to buy land? And six acres isn't a lot!"

Vickey Skipwith was one of the newly freedpeople, the First Generation out of slavery. More than wanting the quantity of acres, they wanted the "unique degree of control over their own labor." Similar to James Henry Woodson, the father of Carter G. Woodson, whose epic story introduced this series, Vickey Skipwith put the belief in southern landownership into action because, "You can't be a genuinely free person in this big country, in this farming country, without owning land."

Landownership placed her name in the county land tax books as a "colored" farmer, paying real estate taxes, and into the postemancipation history of land-owning African Americans in the rural South. Virginia had the highest percentage of



The Virginia historical highway marker that recognizes the Parker Sydnor historic site located in Mecklenburg County. Ummo Sydnor is the fourth great granddaughter of Parker Sydnor, 2015. (Photo credit: Ania Rzesutko)



Vickey Skipwith's home place, ca. 1970.

African Americans who bought land during the first generation of the postemancipation era. Historian Jeffrey R. Kerr-Ritchie sums up how African Americans like Vickey Skipwith represented "simple stubbornness on the part of the freedpeople — they desired land and it eventually came."

A poor woman who couldn't read or write, Vickey was venturing into the unknown by becoming a "farmer woman." Subsequent U.S. Census Records would consistently indicate that she could "neither read nor write." Nevertheless, she would

write herself into history in a different way as a history-maker.

There are public records as well as oral histories and collective memories from the descendant community that construct how Vickey Skipwith could have been like a "first-time home buyer" at a real estate closing in the 21st century. What could that day going to the Boydton courthouse in order to get her land deed have been like for Vickey? Descendant voices from the homeplace community tell Vickey's story.

See VICKEY, page A5

Chase City rescue operations taken over by county

Squad becomes second to disband, following in footsteps of Clarksville

The Chase City Rescue Squad plans to disband and turn over operations to Mecklenburg County on July 1, 2023, in order to continue its medical and first responder services in the area.

The Chase City unit is the second local rescue squad that has decided to hand over operations to the county, due to a declining volunteer base.

In January, the Mecklenburg County Lifesaving and Rescue Squad based in Clarksville said it would disband by July 1, 2023, citing strained revenues and lack of volunteers.

At Monday's monthly meeting of the Board of Supervisors, board member Andy Hargrove — who heads the public safety committee — said he expects Mecklenburg's two other transport services, one in Boydton and the other in South Hill, and its volunteer fire departments will come under the county's operational umbrella within the next few years.

He said the cost of maintaining these services is outpacing the ability of volunteer units to sustain operations through private funding and grants.

Announcing the decision to dissolve its non-profit board, CCRS President Bobby Lester said, "The squad will continue to operate and provide high level emergency medical care to Chase City residents. Instead of being run by a non-profit board and staffed by a mix of volunteers and paid EMS providers, the staff will be paid employees of the county. The people who will continue to operate the rescue squad will be the same highly trained professionals that area residents have come to trust and rely on during medical crises."

See SQUAD, page A6

South Hill pitches in to rebuild veterans park

South Hill Town Council voted Monday to appropriate \$10,000 to the Veterans Memorial Park Committee to help with repairs to a brick retaining wall on the south side of the memorial park.

The vote was 6-2 with Council members Ben Taylor and Joseph Taylor both voting "no" due to budget-related concerns.

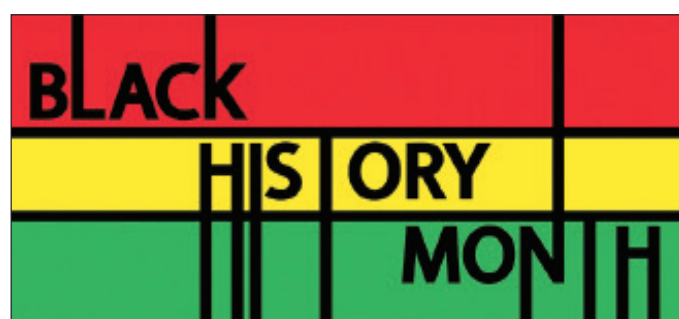
Portions of the brick wall at the Veterans Memorial Park collapsed in 2020. Since then, a committee comprised of veterans with American Legion Post 79 and V.F.W. Post 7166 in South Hill has been attempting to raise funds to pay for the repairs. Committee Chair Robert Owens said to date, they've raised \$4,050 toward a goal of \$22,000.

See SOUTH HILL, page A3



INSIDE: CHASE CITY MOVES TO SHUTTER RAILROAD CROSSINGS | PAGE A3

2 sections, 20 pages ■ Obituaries, A2 ■ Opinion, A4 ■ Classified, B8-B10 ■ Comics, B4-B5 ■ Sports, B1-B3



This is the third 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/>

VICEY

From page A1

They said that it was hot and dry on the first of June in 1888, but still chilly during the early dawn when they set out. Vacey Skipwith and her little family group started out from near the crossroads of Cox Road at Old Cabin Point going to Boydton, our county seat. Vacey certainly didn't want to go to Boydton alone. She had to miss a day's work — it wasn't good to miss work at Prestwould on a Friday — but she wanted to make sure the deed was filed correctly and in her name.

She hitched up the mule and along with Brother Parker Sydnor, her sister and three of her brothers, they left Prestwould. By the way, Richard, Solomon, and Esau had to find three other farm hands that were willing to fill in for them at the plantation where they still worked, but as paid laborers, or they wouldn't be paid for the entire week. Anyhow, they were all dressed up like they were going to church. We guess Vacey was about thirty-four years old and thinking about her success in buying land with a little log cabin — and feeling very good.

Riding behind her in the wagon were Celia, Richard, Solomon, and Esau. Fictive kin to Vacey and also born in slavery time, Brother Parker Sydnor was able-bodied and handsome with his long, naturally curly hair tied back into a pony tail. He sat beside Vacey and took it all in stride — like he owned a town. We knew him! We can see him now sitting straight, reining the mule along the eleven miles on what used to be the Old Plank Road to Boydton.

And because of her past, Vacey certainly must've felt humbled and in praise of her blessing. So, this is what freedom finally means, the thought must've entered her mind ... to have my own piece of land. Thank you, Jesus. Praise God. She must've sighed deeply with all the weight of the past. With that sigh of a prayer to God, her feelings must've bowed down to the higher power, right there in the wagon.

They got there. Now quieter among themselves, they headed for the back door of the courthouse, the entrance that had the sign, "colored people." Vacey couldn't read. She couldn't write. But there were people in the family who could. Her sister Celia Skipwith, the nanny for Miss Annie L's children at Prestwould, had some schooling and even wrote letters. And Brother Sydnor, coming from just across the river in Halifax County in "The Forks," went to school soon after emancipation. That Freedmen's Bureau sent him. He was very good at ciphering, writing, and reading. After freedom came, a lot of his kinfolk got schooling. Some of his people lived right here in Bluestone. After freedom they already legally married with some of Vacey's people and we could get married in church and make our marriages legal with a certificate from the courthouse. Not only jumping the broom like we did before.

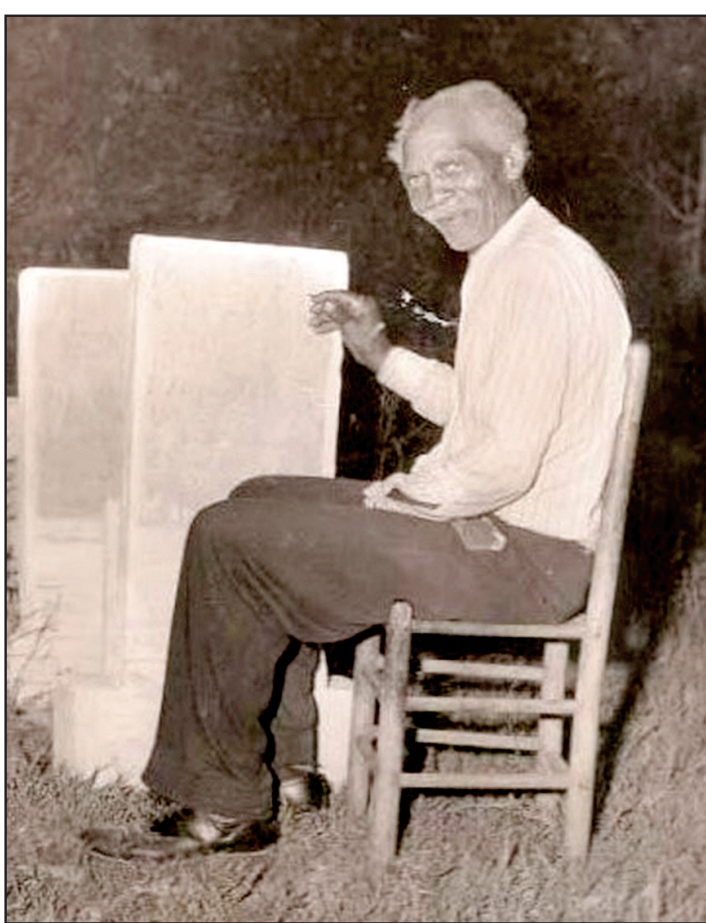
Vacey knew that she needed to see the proof of her name owning the land, even if she couldn't read it. One of the deacons who bought land told Vacey, "I don't have much schoolin' but I knew that when you bought any land, you was supposed to get a deed with it. So, you go get your deed." That's why she was on the way to Boydton.

They said that Vacey paid out the sixty-two dollars to Mr. J.J. Crowder a few weeks earlier. That was a lot of money in those days — about \$1,900 today. She made her X mark on that deed in front of Brother Sydnor, the clerk, and the others. She signed her name with an X and that farm land with its creek and a log cabin was hers — a real home place of her own. Praise God.

Placemaking brings people and historic places together and connects with stories that are passed on for future generations through memories, facts, and truths — among the ways in which we preserve history. Brent Leggs, Executive Director of the African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund at the National Trust of Historic Preservation, tells us that historic landmarks connected to stories "... might otherwise be lost because ... of the abandonment of many African American communities. By saving African American landmarks we can stimulate revitalization and foster interest in places that today seem to exist without history or meaning. ... These places can serve as anchors revising our sense of community." Landmarks come in all shapes and sizes. Throughout Southside, there are national historic sites and local places dedicated to African



Shown at left, members of Vacey Skipwith's descendant community. From left to right, Bettie Shields (Reyes), Paul Shields, and Irene Shields (Douglass), ca. 1943. Above, Cora Irene Sydnor Shields (1900-1976), a Mecklenburg County farmer and contemporary of Vacey Skipwith at the home place.



Patrick Robert "Parker" Sydnor (1854-1950) of Halifax County. Parker Sydnor was a farmer and tombstone maker in Virginia. (Photo Credit: Paul Saunier for the Richmond Times Dispatch)

American history that can offer revitalization and pay homage to foster new interest and appreciation.

Because of its subsequent historical associations in Southside Virginia, Vacey Skipwith's home place became known as the Parker Sydnor historic log cabin site. Not yet open to the public, the site is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and the Virginia Landmarks Register. Among other African American sites that are listed on the National and Virginia Registers and that contribute to and anchor African American history in Southside are the Robert Russa Moton Museum, Averette School and Wharton Memorial Baptist Church, and West End High School.

Other locally recognized historic sites include Thyne Institute, L.E. Coleman African American Museum, Rosenwald school buildings, and many, many historic African American churches that were institutionalized in the 19th century and that continue to have active congregations. Stay tuned for next week's final article of the series, "This is Us: Preserving Our Church Histories." African American historic places in Virginia "represent a living testimony to the year-round and year-after-year" appre-

ciation and learning about African American history and its extraordinary and ordinary history-makers.

We don't have any photo of Vacey Skipwith. If you have a photo of this history-maker from Southside, please contact Literacy InterActives at info@literacy-interactives.org.

Did you know?

Born in West Virginia, Katherine G. Johnson (1918-2020) was a mathematician whose calculations of orbital mechanics as a NASA scientist were critical to the success of the first and subsequent U.S. crewed spaceflights.



Johnson made many critical technical contributions to NASA space flight missions, including calculating the trajectory of astronaut Alan Shepard's historic 1961 flight, when Shepard became the first American to reach space. Her mathematical calculations were responsible for his safely returning to earth. The space agency noted her "historical role as one of the first African American women to work as a NASA scientist." The acclaimed book and movie, "Hidden Figures," is based on Katherine Johnson and the African American women scientists at NASA during the years of the Space Race. She died at 101.

VIEWPOINT

From page A4

These souls are systematically and repeatedly being denied parole, while those who have been convicted after 1995 are being released as dictated by their assigned "mandatory release date."

It has been estimated that for the past 17 years, at least 9,180 of Virginia's prisoners with felony convictions after 1995 had been released according to their mandatory release date. That's an average of 15% of the state's total of felony convictions between 2005 and 2022.

However, for the last 27 years, between 1995-2022, only 7% or nearly 2,862 of the 53,000-plus of Virginia's prisoners, who are still under the states abolished parole system, have been granted parole.

In response to the states controversial mask mandatory issue, Lt. Gov. Sears had commented that "parents should give their children hope and a future to create generational wealth for themselves and their community."

What kind of "hope" can those still waiting to be granted parole receive when faced with the barriers of "my way, or the highway"?

David Watkins
Stafford, Va.

A special thanks

Dear Viewpoint:
A special thank you — the Clarksville Community Choir fundraiser from year 2021 for the MCCA collected a total \$3,965.00. Thanks to all who contributed, churches, organizations and individuals and a special thanks to the Clarksville's Ruritans.
From the Clarksville Community Choir

South Hill student named to William & Mary Dean's List

Geoffrey Tozzi from South Hill was recently named to the Dean's List at the College of William & Mary for the fall 2021 semester. In order to achieve Dean's List status, a full-time degree seeking undergraduate student must take at least 12 credit hours and earn a 3.6 Quality Point Average during the semester. William & Mary is the second oldest institution of higher learning in the United States.

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"382 days. That's how long I've been waiting for someone to come. My name is Austin. They tell me I'm the best boy, always happy, always smiling, always loving-on everybody, 2.5 years old, handsome, neutered, vaccinated & ready to jump in your vehicle! So many people come through. I prance and make a fuss to show them how special they are. But if they do come in my kennel, it's only for a minute. I want them to stay so bad that I always block the door and make them push me down and away to get out. I fight for my chance at love. I prance with my toys. I kiss and hug them. I wag my whole back-end. Yesterday I got up and made my cot, stacking my toys neatly on it like I always do. I heard it was Valentine's Day. This was one Hound who was positive someone would fall in love with me! But another sunset came and I'm still here, behind this same cage wire, alone. Please come pick me! I'll love and protect you and I get along with other dogs. I won't bother you and I'll try to behave. Call (434) 374-8076 or email lakecountryrspca@yahoo.com. Visit at 11764 Hwy. 15, Clarksville, VA Mon-Sat from 12-4pm."