



BARON GIRLS, DRAGON BOYS WIN REGION CONTESTS, LOOK TO ADVANCE TO STATE TOURNEY » SPORTS, PAGE B1

today's lake level: 298.16 feet

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End set for virtual learning

Mecklenburg schools to discontinue online instruction starting in 2022-23

Mecklenburg County Public Schools will no longer offer virtual learning options for students beginning with the 2022-23 school year. Superintendent of Schools Paul Nichols announced the change Monday at the February meeting of the Mecklenburg County School Board. While Nichols gave no reason for the change, he did note that both virtual learning providers, Virginia Virtual Academy K12 and the Virginia Department of Education, have been no-

tified that the school division would no longer offer remote learning options. Nichols provided no data on the switch by some students to virtual instruction, and no board member asked about student performance of those pursuing lessons virtually. Data from the 2020-21 school year — when schools were forced to close due to the pandemic — showed that learning loss among students taking remote classes was significant. The

average passing rate for all SOL tests fell by double-digit percentages from 79.48 percent in 2019 to 60.46 percent in 2021. The School Board was not asked to vote on the request. The only comment about the pending change was made by trustee Wanda Bailey during a discussion of the school division's declining average daily membership (ADM), a measure of enrollment, and

See VIRTUAL, page A8



BJ Upton shown with son Brayden

Fatal crash spurs petition to ban squatted trucks

County woman presses for state legislation after boyfriend's death

By SUSAN KYTE
Sun Staff Writer

A county woman is striving to make something good come from a tragedy by pushing to change Virginia laws regarding modified vehicles after her boyfriend died in a crash with a squatted truck. Anna "Nikki" Allman started an online petition seeking to ban modified trucks known as Carolina Squat trucks from being driven on public roads. The petition is at www.change.org/p/virginia-state-house-bj-s-law. In less than 24 hours her appeal garnered over 2,800 signatures. A Carolina Squat truck, also known as a California Lean" or "Tennessee Tilt," is a pickup truck with an after-market modification that lifts vehicles unevenly, so that the front end is higher than the back. It is street legal in every state except North Carolina. On Wednesday, February 16, Allman's boyfriend, Jody "BJ" Upton, Jr., age 27, was on his way to work just before 7 a.m. when he was killed in a head-on crash with a driver of a Carolina Squat truck. The wreck occurred on Skipwith Road about one mile east of Wootton Road. Anthony Newcomb, 19, was driving a modified 2016 Chevy pickup when, according to Virginia State Police, his vehicle crossed the centerline of Skipwith Road and crashed into a 2005 Chevy pickup that Upton was driving. Newcomb's truck rolled over and he suffered minor injuries. Upton was pronounced dead at the scene.

See PETITION, page A3

Two N.C. men die in single-vehicle crash

Two North Carolina men in their 20s were killed Saturday night in a single-vehicle crash near Clarksville. The wreck happened just before 10 p.m. Saturday night on Old National Highway near Merifield Drive, according to Virginia State Police spokesperson Shelby Crouch. A 2005 Honda Accord driven by 25-year-old Caleb Riggins of Elon, N.C. crossed the highway centerline, overcorrected, and ran off the right side of the road,

See CRASH, page A2

PILLAR OF LIFE AND SPIRIT



Churches tap into histories as fonts of Black health and wellness

By ANGELITA REYES
Special to The Sun

The Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH), the organization founded in 1926 by Dr. Carter G. Woodson — a Virginia native credited as the originator of Black History Month — is focused on the importance of Black health and wellness in 2022. According to ASALH, "This theme acknowledges the legacy of not only Black scholars and medical practitioners in Western medicine, but also other ways of knowing (e.g., birthworkers, doulas, midwives, naturopaths, herbalists, etc.) throughout the African Diaspora." The theme also acknowledges initiatives and institutions that have enabled wellness and a sense of being despite the vast disparities caused by historical racism, inequities, and injustices.



The Sanctuary, ca. 1876 by Forbes, Edwin (1839-1895), artist. Courtesy Library of Congress. Top photo: a rural church in Virginia. Courtesy of Unsplash.

Audre Lorde (1934-1992), the African American feminist, poet, and activist reminds us, "We are doing more to move forward holistically for the betterment of ourselves, our bodies, our relationships, our communities, and our planet." To sustain that momentum towards attaining wellness and to move forward with

wholesome determination, African Americans have asserted equity within social institutions such as schools, hospitals, and mutual-aid societies. Out of the numerous institutions that have become foundations for wellness and perseverance, the Black

See CHURCHES, page A6



INSIDE: 35 MPH ZONE SOUGHT ON U.S. 58 IN FRONT OF SCHOOL | PAGE A7

2 sections, 20 pages ■ Obituaries, A2 ■ Opinion, A4 ■ Classified, B8-B10 ■ Comics, B6-B7 ■ Sports, B1-B3



Young woman singing in church. Courtesy of Unsplash.

CHURCH

From page A1

church as an institution stands at the center and the historical beginning of the African American community in America. The renowned Harvard University scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. tells us, “the church is the oldest, most continuous, and most important institution ever created by the African American people.” It is fitting that this Black History Month series ends on the topic of the remarkable Black church as the first institution created by African Americans in the “new world.”

In Gates’ acclaimed book and captivating PBS series, “The Black Church: This is Our Story, This is Our Song,” we learn that the church was the foundation for enslaved African people to create new identities in the American colonies. Black and White religious convictions and practices in the South emerged as mutual connections. Enslaved Africans who were brought to the American colonies could not sustain all of their traditional religions and rituals that they had known in Africa. But they had “fragments of faith” that they remembered, practiced, and honored.

One of the traditions that can be traced to West Africa is that of the Ring Shout. The Ring Shout was a ritual of praise that helped to sustain wellness in the church communities. Many of the enslaved populations during the late 1600s and 1700s spoke different languages from separate coastal regions of West and Central Africa. The Ring Shout served as the ritual dance in the praise houses (early Christian congregations) for worshipping among all groups. As spiritual beings, they would internalize the mantra, “I am because we are, we are, therefore I am,” which sustained hope and constructive resilience in wake of their historical destiny.

The Black church became a stronghold of resistance, sustenance, activism, and ultimately a place and space for communal well-being. Gates emphasizes that the Black church is diverse, it is not one denomination or one kind of thing that has its beginnings only in the history texts of slavery. Yet, the church is still “the cultural cauldron that Black people created to combat a system designated in every way to crush their spirit.” In this sense, the history of the church is grounded as an institution of faith and wellness.

Many African American churches are now documenting their individual church histories. Recently,



White Oak Baptist Church cemetery, Halifax County, Va. Courtesy Angelita D. Reyes

church leaders, public historians, scholars, and participants from municipal, civic groups, and cultural organizations gathered for an interactive videoconferencing workshop series that focused on preserving, establishing, and documenting (reading, writing, and collecting), church histories. Sponsored by Literacy InterActives, Inc., AARP Virginia, and Virginia Humanities, the virtual gathering, “This is Us: Preserving Our Church Histories,” advocated for the preservation of African American church histories.

Benjamin Ross, senior church historian for 38 years at 6th Mount Zion Baptist Church in Richmond, expertly led participants through church preservation strategies. “Just about every aspect of church history can be preserved and become a part of your church’s historic preservation ... every church should have its historian.” Ross encouraged participants to think outside of the box about preserving documents related to the “sacred spaces” of their church. 6th Mount Zion Baptist Church dates back to 1867 and began in a Confederate horse stable by the James River.

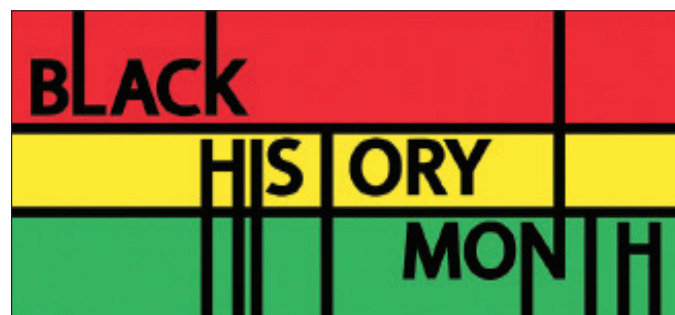
In Southside Virginia there are many African American churches that date to the 19th century and continue to have active congregations. For example, in 1877 five African American trustees, of the First Generation of freedpeople, bought land from the owner of Prestwold Plantation and founded St. Matthew Baptist Church in Mecklenburg County “for the colored people and their descendants.” Descendants of those first trustees continue to be a part of St. Matthew’s community.

Throughout Virginia, early African American churches or congregations became landholding entities — echoes of the belief in the prosperity of real estate as an indication of freedom to be handed down to the generations. Represented at the videoconferencing workshop series by Pastor Michael Jackson of South Boston, St. Matthew Baptist Church is an active congregation that seeks to document its rich church history. However, the earliest African American church documented in Southside is the remarkable Bluestone Baptist Church founded in 1758.

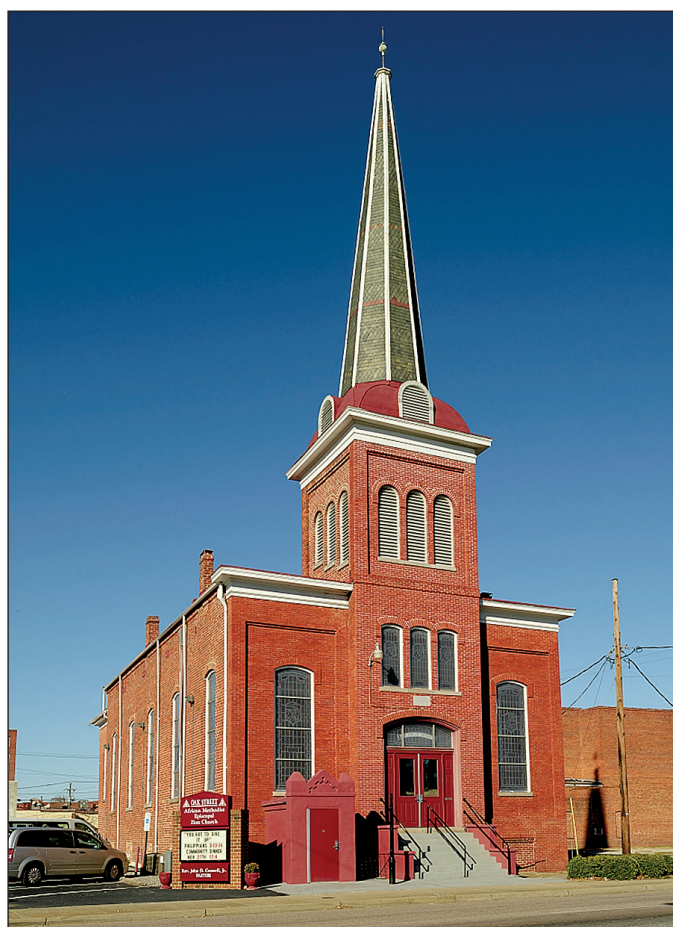
In her classic history of African American churches in the South, “Trabelin’ On: The Slave Journey to Afro-Baptist Faith,” Mechal Sobel documents that Bluestone Baptist Church was founded on the William Byrd III plantation in 1758 “at a point on the Bluestone River.” That early Bluestone congregation predated other “praise houses” that were founded by enslaved African Virginians. Pastor Lawrence T. Wilkerson and other church historians, researched their church history and published an impressive 200-page volume of Bluestone Baptist Church history entitled, “Retelling Our Story: The Past and Present of Bluestone Baptist Church 1758-203.”

In his lectures on preserving church history, Benjamin Ross emphasizes the importance of public records such as land deeds as one of the ways in which to document “your church history.” Documentary history strengthens the church community. Similar to many other African American communities, Southside Virginia family and community histories connect at the site of the rural church from the cradle to the grave. In other words, not only are births celebrated in the church, but most African American churches have their own cemeteries to memorialize the dead. The sacred spaces of the church are not only reserved for the “sanctuary,” but extend to outside spaces that include cemeteries and honoring families and individuals once connected to the church.

The outside sanctuary is that of the sacred spaces of church cemeteries and related funerary objects such as cemetery headstones. Patrick Robert “Parker” Sydner



This is the last 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 Sydner historic preservation project located in Mecklenburg County. For more on the project visit <https://literacyinteractives.org/>



Oak Street African American Episcopal Zion Church. Courtesy Library of Congress.

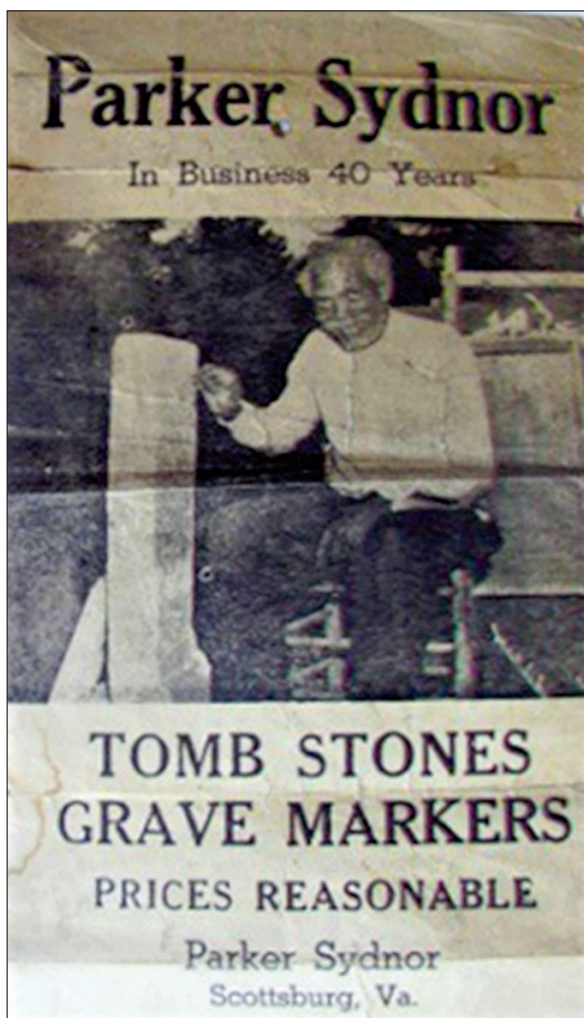
(1854-1950), another African American “son of Southside,” was a farmer and stonemason who carved tombstones — what is now referred to as cemetery headstones. Born in Halifax County and having attended a Freedmen’s Bureau school, Sydner’s renown in Southside Virginia reached Richmond and he was featured in an article about his unusual stonemasonry work in the Richmond Times Dispatch (September 13, 1946). Sydner explained his mission to the interviewer: “A while back, the marble yards charged so much that the colored people down in this part never had any stones in the graveyards at all. But I’ve brought them in reach and now they’re putting them up, even for people been dead 50 years.” Cemetery headstones offer ritual and sacred respect for the dead, but are also important genealogical records connected to African American church histories.

African American cemeteries reflect segregation history. Sydner’s remark camouflages burial segregation and the reasons why African Americans did not have headstones or cemeteries of their own. Therefore, when African Americans could amass their own cemeteries, these sacred places were inevitably a part of church properties and church history.

The Baptist General Convention of Virginia (BGCVA) sponsors the initiative, Preservation of African American Churches, Cemeteries, Historic Structures, Associated Land and Landmarks in Virginia, in order to assist churches and associations in historical preservation. The initiative also provides training for new and current church historians and takes documenting church history to the next level of technology through digital documentation. The key component to the success of this initiative involves documenting and archiving African American church history through digital archives for documents, books and print records. This project assists churches with researching and documenting other properties including cemeteries and other structures that could possibly be recognized for their historical significance in Virginia.

Documenting church histories adds new dimensions and perspectives about historic preservation. Preserving church histories is a dynamic part of African American history that contributes to wellness in the beloved community. For additional information on Literacy InterActives, Inc., contact info@literacyinteractives.org.

Visit the Workshop Series. “This is Us: Preserving Our Church Histories” on YouTube



Parker Sydner business flyer, ca. 1940. Courtesy Angelita D. Reyes

Did you know?

Ronald Erwin McNair (1950 – 1986) was an American NASA astronaut and physicist. He died during the launch of the Space Shuttle Challenger in which he was serving as one of three mission specialists in a crew of seven. Prior to the Challenger disaster, Dr. McNair flew as a mission specialist aboard Challenger from February 3 to February 11, 1984, becoming the second African American and first member of the Baha’i Faith to fly in space. In the summer of 1959, he refused to leave the segregated Lake City Public Library in South Carolina without being allowed to check out his books. After the police and his mother were called, he was allowed to borrow books from the library. The building that housed the library at the time is now named after him. McNair was posthumously awarded the Congressional Space Medal of Honor in 2004, along with all crew members lost in the Challenger and Columbia disasters.

