

LOCAL PERSPECTIVES

'It's time ... to grow': Museum tells history of Saint Paul's College

LAWRENCEVILLE — As Saint Paul's College struggled financially and seemed likely to cease operations, Bobby Conner got to thinking: "What is going to happen to the history of the college if it closed?"



Bill Lohmann
wlohmann@TimesDispatch.com

Good question. Conner, a Brunswick County resident who appreciates history, began talking to college officials in early 2012. As soon as the college shut down in June 2013, he went to Millard "Pete" Stith, the school's last president, and discussed gathering — before it was too late — important records and other artifacts that could tell the story of the historically black college that for more than a century had been such a big part of the county and the town of Lawrenceville.

No one else had volunteered to take on the task — some people and institutions wanted bits and pieces, Stith said, but no one except Conner was willing to collect everything. So Stith got permission from the school's board of trustees and told Conner to go for it.

Conner, who at the time was helping to manage a country store and working part time in the county's tourism office, started making regular trips to the campus in his spare time, going from building to building, office to office, file cabinet to file cabinet, looking in closets and attics, retrieving papers and photographs, ledger books and artwork, just about anything he thought might be of historical significance: even a basketball banner hanging in the gym's rafters.

He packed most everything in his Dodge Neon and made numerous trips — "lots of trips," he said — and stashed everything above the county's tourism office.

"It just concerned me," Conner said of the idea that no one was archiving the college's history or the story of its founder, the Rev. James Solomon Russell, now a saint in the Episcopal Church. "You have to go back to the history of this man: born into slavery, educated, became a priest, came here and started a school in a white Southern town, got along with everybody. When you pull all that together, it would have been a huge loss to us to lose that."

In 2015, when the college was taken over by Pension

Benefit Guaranty Corp. to cover unpaid pension obligations, Conner's access to campus buildings ended. His initial effort was simply to get everything of importance out of harm's way, but then his attention turned to what to do next. The answer? A museum.

He pulled together a team of community volunteers, including Saint Paul's alumni, to form a nonprofit organization. Cataloging of the artifacts began, and the Brunswick Board of Supervisors made available a vacant bank building on Main Street in Lawrenceville. The James Solomon Russell-Saint Paul's College Museum and Archives opened its doors in the spring. A new website goes live this week.

The small museum contains several rooms of artifacts, including pieces related to Russell, such as chairs and a lectern from his earliest church and a bust of Russell that was a gift to the college by a class in the 1930s. But much of what Conner rescued remains in boxes and storage, out of public view. So the museum will be moving to larger quarters later this winter or spring, into the college's former student center that is now the Brunswick County Conference Center.

"We've utilized all this space; it's time for us to grow," said James Grimstead, chairman of the museum.

Charlette T. Woolridge, the county administrator, said the museum's move into the conference center is "a perfect fit. The museum is a major part of Brunswick County's history and will be a vital tourist attraction for Saint Paul's College alumni and visitors to the County."

Stith said the preservation of the college's story — and particularly Russell's role in its founding — is "very important." He praised Conner for taking the initiative.

"Bobby has really done a yeoman's job," Stith said. "No matter how the school turns out in its next life, there will be some legacy there."



Bobby Conner (left) and James Grimstead are on the board of the James Solomon Russell-Saint Paul's College Museum and Archives.

The campus was sold in late 2017 to Xinhua Education Investment Corp. A filing with the State Corporation Commission lists David Z. Lu as its registered agent with an address in Vienna in Fairfax County. The company hasn't said publicly what it intends to do with the campus, and Lu did not respond to a request for comment.

Meantime, the museum presses on.

Conner and Grimstead, along with fellow museum board members Teya Whitehead, Regina Gordon and Sylvia Allen, led me on a tour of the museum and told me the story of Russell, who led a remarkable life.

Russell was born into slavery in Mecklenburg County, four years before the beginning of the Civil War, living his early years with his mother. His parents were forced to live and work on separate plantations. Education became a cornerstone of his life early on.

Despite financial hardships, he established himself as a teacher in the black community even before attending his dream school, Hampton Institute, and later became the first student at what would become Bishop Payne Divinity School in Petersburg, an Episcopal seminary for blacks.

He began his ministry in Lawrenceville, helped to establish a series of churches and schools in the region and, seeing a need for educational opportunities for blacks beyond one-room schoolhouses, founded Saint Paul Normal and Industrial School in 1888.

There, students studied traditional academic courses — the school supplied much-needed teachers to surrounding areas — and also received hands-on training in trades. The school continued to expand and by 1917 consisted of students from 20 states as well as from the Caribbean and Africa, according to Encyclopedia Virginia, and was much in demand.

In his research through the

college archives, Conner came across letters from parents begging Russell to enroll their children, as such opportunities were rare for many black families.

"Some of them were heart-breaking," Conner said. "Parents would write, 'I don't have any money, but I'll come work for you.' They knew what this man was trying to do. It was a chance for their children to get an education."

The well-traveled Russell raised funds for the school from famous benefactors such as J.P. Morgan, Julius Rosenwald and John D. Rockefeller. Russell retired from the school in 1929, having groomed his son to take over. Russell died in 1935, and Saint Paul's became an accredited four-year college in the 1940s.

Despite his achievements, Russell is largely underappreciated, said Grimstead, a 1958 graduate of James Solomon Russell High, the school for blacks during segregation, though he didn't grasp the full scope of Russell's accomplishments until years later after moving to New Jersey and reading about him in an Episcopal Church newsletter. He hopes the museum will help tell Russell's story to new generations.

The museum also provides a sort of home base for alumni, who have little else to connect them to Lawrenceville now that the college is closed.

"This is Saint Paul's right now," said Whitehead, secretary of the museum board and a 1998 graduate. "If we didn't have this, [Russell's] legacy would be gone. This museum — to the alumni, to the community — is everything."

Said Gordon — the board's treasurer and a Saint Paul's alumna with a degree in business administration whose father and sister also graduated from the college — "People come in here and get very emotional."

wlohmann@timesdispatch.com
(804) 649-6639

PERSONALITIES

When **Anderson Cooper** first met **Sean Penn** after the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, the CNN anchor was initially skeptical of the actor's intentions to help the recovery efforts in the ravaged country. In time, Penn won Cooper over.



Cooper

"I'm not sure how Sean got to Port-au-Prince, Haiti. It certainly was not easy. I'm not sure how much of a plan he had when he got there. But he didn't just come by himself, he came with a team," Cooper said Saturday night at Penn's ninth annual benefit for the J/P Haitian Relief Organization.

The fundraiser raised \$3.5 million at the Wiltrern Theater in Los Angeles.

Even though Cooper was being honored, he heaped praise on Penn and his nonprofit group.

"Sean came with supplies, he stayed long after most of us had moved on," Cooper added. "Sean stayed, listened and he learned."

Penn praised Cooper's "aggressiveness to tell the truth in reporting the news." The actor has hosted the fundraiser for J/P HRO on the eve of the Golden Globes since he established the charity in 2010.

Larry David, Casey Affleck, Sarah Silverman, Jimmy Kimmel, Ben Stiller and Garcelle Beauvais were among the guests. Musical performances were by **Macy Gray, Billie Eilish and Yusuf Islam (Cat Stevens)** as the headliner.

The event honored San Juan Mayor **Carmen Yulin Cruz** and ambassador **Kenneth Merten. The Point Dume Bombers**, who stayed up all night to help save their Malibu neighborhood from the wildfires that scorched the area, were also recognized.



A \$750 million defamation lawsuit filed against CBS by the brother of **JonBenet Ramsey** has been settled.

The Daily Camera reports court records show that a Michigan Circuit Court judge on Wednesday dismissed the lawsuit filed by **Burke Ramsey** in December 2016. The terms of the settlement have not been disclosed.

The lawsuit said Burke Ramsey's reputation was ruined after a television series suggested he killed his 6-year-old sister more than two decades ago. An attorney for CBS declined to comment.

The beauty pageant star was found dead in the basement of her family's home in Boulder, Colo., in December 1996. A prosecutor cleared her parents and brother.

— The Associated Press

VIRGINIA LOTTERIES

SUNDAY, JAN. 6

Day Pick 3: 0-9-6

Day Pick 4: 8-4-8-1

Day Cash 5: 8-17-22-30-33

Night Pick 3: 7-2-1

Night Pick 4: 7-4-8-0

Night Cash 5: 4-9-10-22-31

SATURDAY, JAN. 5

Night Pick 3: 1-4-1

Night Pick 4: 0-2-5-9

Night Cash 5: 8-16-24-32-33

Bank a Million: 3-12-13-15-21-34 (BB 1)

Power: 3-7-15-27-69 (PB 19) 2x

There was no jackpot-winning ticket in Saturday's \$69 million multistate Powerball drawing. Wednesday's estimated jackpot is \$82 million.

ABOUT THE RICHMOND TIMES-DISPATCH

YOUR RIGHT TO KNOW
PUBLIC NOTICES E19-E20

LICENSE
▪ A tobacco store at 5200 Brook Road seeks the authority to sell alcoholic beverages. **E19**

MEETING
▪ Henrico's Board of Zoning Appeals has a hearing scheduled for Jan. 24. **B5**

Richmond Oddities Shirt — Iron Dog

The iron dog used to stand in front of a general store on Broad Street. Every day, a little girl would walk by and hug the dog. The little girl died of scarlet fever and was buried at Hollywood Cemetery. After her death, the iron dog was moved to her grave. Because there was an iron shortage during the Civil War, the owners didn't want the dog to be melted down to make ammunition. Ever since, stories have circulated that the dog protects the little girl and moves around on the gravesite, that his eyes follow visitors, and that wild barks are heard late at night.

\$30 — Makes a great gift. More oddity designs available.

Shop today at Richmond.com/Oddities

Richmond Times-Dispatch

Club RTD Corner

Club RTD is a free members-only program for all Times-Dispatch subscribers that features special deals and contests. Here are some recent deals available through Club RTD:

- \$5 off at Carytown Burgers & Fries
- Free dessert at Boka Grill
- 10 percent off at Vogue Flowers
- \$10 off oil change at Grease Monkey
- \$10 off at Play It Again Sports

Sign up at Richmond.com/Club-RTD

Subscriber services

Delivery or billing issues?
♦ Call 644-4181 or 800-468-3382
♦ Go to Richmond.com/Contact-us

Monday - Friday
6:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.
Saturday
6:00 a.m. - 11:00 a.m.
Sunday
7:30 a.m. - 11:00 a.m.

Classifieds643-4414
Paid death notices643-4414
Weddings649-6825
Retail ads649-6251
Online ads649-6251
Ad billing649-6208
Story reprints649-6261
Corrections: We want to correct substantive errors. Call the appropriate News department after 10 a.m. (2 p.m. Sunday). Corrections appear on this page.

Photo reprints: Available at Richmond.com/Buy-Photos
Richmond Times-Dispatch USPS 465-620. Published every morning at 300 E. Franklin St., Richmond, VA 23219. Periodicals postage paid at Richmond, VA. All rights reserved. The contents may not be reproduced without permission of the publisher.
POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Richmond Times-Dispatch, 300 E. Franklin St., Richmond, VA 23219.

Executive Editor Paige Mudd649-6671
Managing Editor Mike Szvetitz649-6456
Local and state news649-6331
Richmond.com649-6079
Business news649-6542
Features649-6321
Sports649-6546
Photo649-6541
Editorial649-6305
All other calls649-6000