

NEH Application Cover Sheet

Humanities Initiatives for Faculty at Tribal Colleges and Universities

PROJECT DIRECTOR

Dr. Christina Proenza-Coles
Assistant Professor
P. O. Box 9070
Petersburg, VA 23806
UNITED STATES

E-mail: cproenza@vsu.edu
Phone(W): 804-524-6871
Phone(H):
Fax:

Field of Expertise: History

INSTITUTION

VIRGINIA STATE UNIVERSITY
Petersburg, VA

APPLICATION INFORMATION

Title: *Local History in a Global Context: Petersburg's African American History in the Context of the Atlantic World*

Grant Period: From 2/2008 to 2/2009

Field of Project: History

Description of Project: To establish a national center of study for "Petersburg and the Atlantic World" that focuses on Petersburg's African American History as a principal theme. The goal of the program is to provide original pedagogical and research opportunities to strengthen Petersburg's educational institutions and establish a center of study and historical preservation that will help to revitalize the area.

BUDGET

Outright Request	\$74,322.00	Cost Sharing	
Matching Request		Total Budget	\$74,322.00
Total NEH	\$74,322.00		

GRANT ADMINISTRATOR

Mrs. Valerie Berry
Manager, Grants and Contracts
One Hayden Drive
P. O. Box 9002
Petersburg, VA 23806
UNITED STATES

E-mail: vberry@vsu.edu
Phone(W): 804-524-5658
Fax:

RATIONALE

Petersburg was a hub well before the English landed in Virginia. Located along the fall line, this area was a center of trade for Virginia's native peoples. Petersburg's prehistoric fishing weirs continue to serve as fishing sites for locals. Petersburg's vital role in colonial history is due to its location near the junction of the James and Appomattox Rivers, the point of entry for the vast majority of enslaved peoples coming to Virginia. Some of the area's historic sites like City Point are well preserved and accessible, others like Bermuda Hundred and Pocahontas Island seem to have been almost completely forgotten. The city's vibrant 19th century history is evident in its beautiful, dilapidated downtown buildings.

Before the arrival of the Mayflower, the first Africans to settle in a mainland English colony arrived in Jamestown, Virginia in 1619, where they were purchased, probably as indentured servants, by John Rolfe. Rolfe had introduced a West Indian strain of tobacco to Virginia in 1612, germinating the first successful cash crop in North America. The first Africans in Anglo-America labored alongside English servants in tobacco fields; upon completing their service many purchased property and bond laborers for themselves. In 1731, John Bolling, grandson of John Rolfe and Pocahontas, built tobacco warehouses and brought the first African American enslaved laborers to what became known as Petersburg. By the time of the American Revolution (in which several African Americans from Petersburg served), Petersburg was exporting 1/3 of the nation's tobacco.

Antebellum Petersburg was an economic hub in the Atlantic economy as an entrepot of slaves and tobacco as well as a center of production for flour, textiles, and iron. The city's successful market and industrial economy undergirded by slavery and tobacco, provided opportunities for slaves to hire themselves to tobacco factories (in which 99% of the workers were black); some tobacco workers were able to purchase their freedom. A large free black population—the largest free black population in the state of Virginia—and an even larger enslaved population supported Petersburg's vibrant economy. By 1800 many of Petersburg's residents of color lived in Pocahontas Island where freemen might earn their livings on the water or as small business owners. In 1800 numerous Petersburg residents, influenced by the events and migrations of the Haitian Revolution, were involved with Gabriel Prosser's planned rebellion. We wish to

document the experience of free blacks and slaves in Petersburg in light of the experiences of other Afro-Atlantic communities as well as the tradition of free blacks in maritime culture throughout the Atlantic.

In the late 18th century Petersburg residents established two of the first black churches in the U.S., paralleling the concurrent establishment of the first black churches in Georgia, South Carolina, Jamaica, the British West Indies, Nova Scotia, and Sierra Leone. Petersburg's First Baptist Church, organized in 1774, is the oldest black church in the region, and Petersburg's Gillfield Baptist Church followed closely. While free blacks and slaves established Gillfield, the congregation united with the Portsmouth Association, an organization of white Baptists, in 1815 in a remarkable example of antebellum racial integration. First Baptist housed the area's first African American school and provided training for leaders in education, business, and politics. After returning from missionary work in West Africa, Henry Williams, a religious leader and political activist, served as the pastor of Gillfield from 1865-1900. The Bethany Baptist Sunday School Association he established in 1890 still exists. We wish to document Petersburg's historic role in the establishment of black churches in the U.S., understand how this development intersects with simultaneous developments in other parts of the Atlantic, and analyze the historical connections between Petersburg's churches, economics, education, and politics.

In the early 19th century, Petersburg residents developed ties with West African nations as missionaries, teachers, businessmen, and leaders. Petersburg's Joseph Jenkins Roberts served as Liberia's first black governor, the first president of Liberia College, and the first president of the Liberian nation. His brother served as Liberia's first black bishop. Roberts' career began as a successful merchant in business with another prominent black resident of Petersburg, William Colson. The trading firm of Roberts, Colson, and Company imported and exported merchandise between Monrovia, Philadelphia, and New York. We wish to document the impact of Petersburg residents on the development of Liberia and the experience of West Africans who came to Petersburg's Virginia State University after 1882.

Despite antebellum prohibitions, Petersburg's Beneficial Society of the Free People of Color ran a school for African Americans. After the Civil War (of the sixteen black Americans awarded the Medal of Honor during the Civil War, fourteen received it for service at Petersburg), during Reconstruction Petersburg developed the first public educational institutions for African Americans in the state: Peabody

High School, Virginia's first publicly-supported black high school was chartered in 1880; two years later Petersburg's black leaders pushed the state government to charter the Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute (later Virginia State University), the first fully state-supported, four-year institution of higher learning for blacks in the U.S. Unlike most early black colleges, VSU's faculty and Board of Visitors were of African descent. John Mercer Langston became VSU's president in 1885, after serving eight years as consul-general in Haiti. In 1888 Langston was the first African American elected to Congress from Virginia. During this period Petersburg was home to the Readjustor Party, one of the most successful bi-racial political parties in U.S. history.

In the 1930s and 40s, Luther P. Jackson, a Virginia State professor, wrote several historical accounts of Petersburg's free people of color. He helped to found the first African American studies professional group, the Association for the Study of Negro Life and Culture. Jackson was also an influential political activist and forerunner of the Civil Rights Movement. In the 1950s and 60s Petersburg residents played crucial roles in the civil rights movement, and VSU professors and students made significant scholarly contributions to African American historiography. Wyatt Tee Walker served as minister of Gillfield from 1953-1960, as chairman of the local NAACP, and as director of the local CORE branch. Later he acted as the executive director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference as well as special assistant to New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller. We wish to document the many efforts of Petersburg's religious leaders, political activists, scholars, and students to raise consciousness and fight for civil rights. We also wish to analyze Petersburg's Civil War, Reconstruction, and Civil Rights histories in light of the struggles for abolition, liberation, and social justice throughout the Atlantic.

Until the collapse of the tobacco economy in the 1970s, Petersburg remained a vibrant economic and cultural hub of Southside Virginia with a significant and successful African American population and an educational system ranked among the best in the state. Today, Petersburg is a de-industrialized city with 15% unemployment, 38% adult illiteracy, and almost 35% of its commercial and residential buildings designated as sub-standard. The average income is the lowest in the state. What was once an economic jewel bustling with cultural vibrancy is now a city largely forgotten by the outside world. Building on materials collection and scholarship documenting Petersburg's rise, we wish to develop a center of study

that will allow VSU history students to closely analyze Petersburg's rise and decline in a global in context. Ultimately, we will provide materials and opportunities for students, faculty, and specialists to develop practical strategies for Petersburg's economic and educational revitalization.

This year, thanks to the support of the NEH, Phase 1 of our project is underway. We have developed four sets of thematically, chronologically organized workshops and public lectures to organize materials, confer with scholars, build connections with organizations and individuals in the community, and conceptualize the program. We have very successfully completed the first two-day workshop and lecture session on the impact of tobacco on the development of colonial Petersburg. We examined how colonial Petersburg fit into the Atlantic world system and the origins of the Atlantic system itself. The eight-hour workshop brought together local scholars with expertise in these areas and included an eminent outside historian, Peter H. Wood, who has extensive experience in documenting and analyzing local, colonial African American history and connecting it with the larger world.

This first workshop session allowed us to better conceptualize the goals of the overall program and how to meet them, deepened our understanding of Petersburg's early history, and provided two sets of written resources. Before the workshop we compiled and disseminated to its participants a binder of relevant readings examining local history in a global context, the rise of the Atlantic system, the rise of Petersburg's economy, the development of Petersburg's free black community, and black history's global vision. We also compiled written versions of the presentations given in the workshop based on original work. During the public lecture that took place the day after the workshop, workshop presenters shared brief synopses of their work with the community before the outside scholar gave a talk and engaged the audience in a dialogue about the issues surrounding the preservation and dissemination of Petersburg's African American history. Both the lecture and workshop are on video, and our footage of a local scholar expounding on the significance of several underserved but extremely important historic sites *in situ*, including one of the largest slave entrepots in colonial North America, is another very useful resource that has come out of Phase 1. (Please see Appendix 5 for materials from Phase 1.)

The remaining three workshop/lectures for Phase 1 in 2007 will follow the same format, advancing chronologically: antebellum Petersburg; from Civil War to Civil Rights; Petersburg's economic and

educational crises from the late 20th century to the present. These remaining sessions will continue to increase our knowledge of secondary sources, original analyses, and other resources that help us to better understand Petersburg's African American history, illustrious and painful, and the community's institutional rise and build alliances with members of the community, educators, the university, and the city. With Phase 1 (the lecture/workshop series) under way helping us to conceptualize the project and its possibilities, creating networks and developing resources, we now seek support for Phase 2 of the project, *Petersburg and the Atlantic World (PAW)*. During 2008, the PAW project will allow us to consolidate, index, and disseminate the resources and original research that came out of Phase 1 and establish a center of study for VSU students and other researchers. The PAW program will connect students to relevant resources and research opportunities, and the materials we collect and produce will help to fill gaps in the collections and resources at VSU and the Petersburg Public Library.

Outside of Luther Jackson's articles from the 1930s, and with the exception of the work of Suzanne Lebsack, with whom we are currently working during Phase 1, there are no published materials that examine Petersburg's African American history. There is only one general history of Petersburg; written over forty years ago, the book is out of date and in several instances inaccurate. Phase 2, establishing the PAW program at VSU will 1) produce and disseminate materials, digital and in print, based on original research, analysis, and the compilation and indexing of resources and 2) strengthen VSU's graduate and undergraduate history programs by using Petersburg's untapped and under-analyzed historical sources and collaborating with relevant organizations to create unique teaching and research opportunities.

While the collaborations of Phase 1 are allowing VSU faculty and other professionals committed to the revitalization of Petersburg to establish a conceptual framework and a body of resources to help us better understand Petersburg African American history, Phase 2 will build upon that foundation to create a center of study that will directly engage VSU faculty, students, and historical organizations in the area in a specific teaching and research program that will center around a new historical methods course in VSU's history department and provide new materials and resources to collaborating institutions, specifically the Petersburg Public Library. The participation of project members from the Petersburg Public Library and the Virginia Historical Society will enhance the educational experience of VSU students and contribute to the

conceptualization of the PAW program, while the materials collection and original research that comes out of the PAW project will help to enhance the resources of area institutions.

CONTENT AND DESIGN

We will develop and implement a center of study for VSU history majors and graduate students, the *Petersburg and the Atlantic World* project, that will allow students, faculty, and specialists to collaborate and explore Atlantic history and global issues through the lens of Petersburg's local history and offer opportunities for practical research experience and materials collection. VSU history faculty, in collaboration with project members and consultants from the Virginia Historical Society, the Petersburg Public Library, the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities' South Atlantic Humanities Center, and Duke University, will collect, index, and in some cases, digitize resources including secondary sources, original scholarship, and a catalogue of primary materials and archival holdings. This collaboration will develop a unique program of research that will attract scholars and students to Petersburg and help to publicize and realize our commitment to understanding Petersburg's rich local African American history in a larger Atlantic context.

Phase 2, the establishment of the *Petersburg and the Atlantic World* program will involve 6 components:

- 1) Survey and catalogue secondary and primary sources that advance our understanding of Petersburg's local history and its interconnections with Atlantic history and global processes and themes. While Phase 1 is allowing us to develop bibliographies and identify local resources, it is continually bringing to light new sources of information. We feel that we are in a race against time to locate and document resources that may not continue to exist in the future.
- 2) Develop a maintainable website that contains original content as well as a catalogue of resources that relate to the program. The website will make the aims and resources of the program available outside of VSU as well as serve as a key resource for a research track at VSU centering around Petersburg's local African American history that is integrated with outside historical institutions.
- 3) Produce original research and original content in print, including articles, pamphlets, and binders.
- 4) Develop a field of specialization for VSU students, *Petersburg and the Atlantic World*, with a focus on Petersburg's African American history. This field of specialization will dovetail with the History Department's Black Studies concentration and the Graduate Program's initiative to establish a program in African American history in the context of the Atlantic world.
- 5) Implement a historical methods course, HIST 554, for upper-level history majors and graduate students that will give students practical experience with the research opportunities in the area, including archives, oral history, and historic sites. Project members will collaborate to develop the

curriculum for this course as well as collaborate in its instruction and implementation. Students will not only gain practical experience in doing historical research, they will have the opportunity to work with the VSU's archivist, the City of Petersburg's Special Projects coordinator, the curator of African American history at the Virginia Historical Society, the head of the Petersburg Public Library, and the director of the South Atlantic Humanities Center. Students will not only be "doing history" they will be able to see how history intersects with a variety of professional opportunities.

- 6) Actively engage history programs and historical organizations in the area in our project in order to develop Petersburg history as an area of interest and attention throughout central Virginia and beyond and create the necessary collaborative relationships for a project of this magnitude.

The project team members will meet several times during the course of 2008 to in order to collaborate in the design and establishment of the center of study as well as participate in the design, implementation, and instruction of the historical methods course, HIST 554. Project team members will actively engage in the survey, collection, and production of material relating to Petersburg history throughout the year.

PROJECTED OUTCOMES

Our goal is to document and archive the local history of this former economic hub of the Atlantic world with particular attention to Petersburg's remarkable, significant, and largely understudied African American population, and to make this information, including printed and electronic primary and secondary sources, accessible to the academic as well as wider community. Establishing the PAW program will provide a cornerstone for the development and expansion of VSU's history program; it will offer rich and unique pedagogical and research opportunities that will help to recover Petersburg's history as well as attract students and scholars. The materials that come out of the project will add much needed resources on Petersburg to the Petersburg Public Library and VSU. The *Petersburg and the Atlantic World* project will

- 1) Offer VSU students practical opportunities for original scholarly research based on primary documents, oral histories, and unique local resources. It will connect VSU students with resources at the Virginia Historical Society, the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, and the Petersburg Public Library. Project members and consultants from these institutions will help students realize their research aims and introduce students to a variety of career paths for history scholars.
- 2) Survey, collect, document, and analyze—in writing, video, and electronic format—sources that enhance our understanding of Petersburg's African American history. These resources will fill wide gaps in the collections of VSU's Special Collections archive and the Petersburg Public Library.
- 3) Promote and publicize Petersburg's African American history. The collaborative construction of the PAW center of study with links to the Petersburg Public Library, the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, and the Virginia Historical Society will bring attention to and awareness of the tremendous historical significance of Petersburg's African American history.

- 4) Construct a model for understanding local history in a global context, using African American history in Petersburg as a case study. The PAW project, website, methods course, and institutional collaboration will realize this pedagogical program for VSU history students in 2008. Phase 2 will lay the foundation for Phase 3 of the Petersburg project: the development of transposable curricula for university, secondary, and primary education.

No other university currently provides a specialized history graduate program on African American history in the context of the Atlantic world. We currently have two Master's theses that examine Petersburg's African American history in wider context, and a third is forthcoming. We expect that the PAW website, materials collection, and methods course will stimulate many more. The PAW center, in collaboration with relevant institutions, will be able to provide students a range of research projects including fieldwork opportunities, oral histories, archival development, museum exhibits, and internships. This work will in turn enrich the resources of the collaborating institutions. The development of research on Petersburg will help to pave the way for and contribute to the revitalization of the area by increasing awareness of Petersburg's remarkable history and recognition of Petersburg as a valuable historic site.

The focus of our program is to recover Petersburg's forgotten history, strengthen VSU's history program, and build up resources at VSU and other institutions, yet the overarching goal extends beyond Petersburg. We aim to create a model for using local history to understand global developments and, ultimately, transposable teaching resources integrating different strands of history. Our project will offer a model for integrating public and academic history and make history more informed, insightful, and accessible by helping students and others make the connection between history and everyday life.

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

Virginia State University is an ideal location for the proposed project. The mission of the university and its current Strategic Plan encourage the development of research projects and academic as well as educational programs that foster a critical appreciation of African American history, develop close community relations, and "promote academic programs that integrate instruction, research, and public service." Specifically, VSU's Strategic Plan calls for

- The expansion of the graduate program in History to a Ph.D. program

- An increase of Petersburg community outreach and research opportunities that “emphasize the historical nature of the Petersburg locale”
- The development of a closer relationship with local school districts
- The development of an African American history research and teaching program

Between the archival holdings of the university, the work of VSU’s Institute for the Study of Race Relations (particularly its Oral History Program) and our numerous contacts with the Petersburg community (including Petersburg public schools, the Petersburg community/schools partnership, and the “Petersburg 2007” project), we already have collected and will continue to collect and generate a variety of historical documents, artifacts, and oral histories in Petersburg. The history of the university itself as well as its geographical proximity to the Petersburg Public Library, the Virginia Historical Society, and Petersburg’s historic sites and materials makes VSU an ideal host for the PAW project.

STAFF AND PARTICIPANTS (for full description of participants, see Appendix 2)

Dr. Christina Proenza-Coles is the PI on this project, an Assistant Professor of History at VSU and coordinator of the Black History concentration, specializing in the African Diaspora in the Atlantic World. She played a leadership role in Phase 1 and continues to collect and produce material about Petersburg.

Dr. Dirk Philipson is the co-PI on this project and the PI for Phase 1. He is an Associate Professor in History at VSU who specializes in race relations, social movements, and economic democracy.

Dr. Paul Alkebulan is the Co-Director of VSU’s History Graduate Program. As an Associate Professor of History his expertise is the civil rights movement with an emphasis on the Black Panther Party.

Dr. Richard Chew is the other Co-Director of VSU’s History Graduate Program and an Assistant Professor of Early American History. Dr. Chew’s current research focus is the colonial tobacco market.

Lucious Edwards is the chief archivist at VSU, a trustee and member of many historical boards and commissions, and on the faculty in the VSU Department of History.

Dr. Wesley Hogan is the Co-Director of the Institute for the Study of Race Relations and the liaison to the Petersburg Civil Rights Oral History Project, a community-university collaborative group she chairs with City of Petersburg Special Projects Director, Dulaney Ward.

Dulaney Ward is Consultant for Special Projects for the City of Petersburg and serves in several leadership positions for historical projects. He has extensive, detailed knowledge of Petersburg's early history.

Kristina Patterson is an instructor in the History Department at the Appomattox Regional Governor's School, which serves fourteen school districts, including Petersburg, and adjunct faculty in the History Department of Richard Bland College of William and Mary.

Wayne Crocker is the director of the Petersburg Public Library System. The Petersburg Public Library Newspaper Index is one of the most complete local newspaper indexes in Virginia.

Dr. Lauranett Lee is the curator of African American history at the Virginia Historical Society. She has extensive experience locating, verifying, and interpreting historical documents. She has served as a consultant on numerous historical projects and has substantial teaching experience.

EVALUATION

(1) To evaluate the collection, indexing, and cataloguing of primary and secondary sources that advance our understanding of Petersburg's local history and its interconnections with Atlantic history and global processes, two Virginia archivists, two Virginia historians, three outside scholarly consultants, and a curator from the Virginia Historical Society will evaluate the quality and comprehensiveness of the collection.

(2) For the development of the PAW website with original content as well as a catalogue of resources that relate to the program, we will use public librarians, history scholars connected to the project, two outside history scholars, and two website developers in order to evaluate, comment on, and improve the website.

(3) For the development of instructional materials and activities, VSU history faculty, curriculum specialists, and students will respond to a qualitative questionnaire as to educational quality of the materials.