



A Changing

LAWNSCAPE

As environmentalism goes mainstream,
America's obsession with the lawn is cooling

By **RICH GRISET**

It's a warm summer afternoon in the suburbs, and the lush, verdant grass in everyone's front yards seems to stretch on for miles.

Underfoot of the barking dogs and running children is a thick mat of green wrapped around each house, pleasing to the eye and even better to walk on barefoot.

A well-kept lawn is like having an outdoor living room, one with its own carpet. This turf is the location of cookouts and croquet, of playing catch and jumping through sprinklers. It's a communal domestic space, connecting neighbor to neighbor. It's a large part of why sports like golf and baseball are so pleasing to watch on television: an emerald backdrop to so much athletic accomplishment.

Along with a car, a split-level house and 2.4 children, a beautiful lawn is part of

the idealized suburban American Dream; without it, what would be the point of sectioning off your yard with a white-picket fence? And keeping up a lawn is a point of civic pride, showing that a homeowner cares about their community and social standing.

But in recent decades, the traditional lawn has slowly come under siege. Criticism of the environmental impacts of the lawn, its cost, and the amount of time spent maintaining it have spread like so much crabgrass. Starting with biologist Rachel Carson's 1962 book "Silent Spring," which criticized the use of pesticides, efforts have been underway to rethink the lawn. Journalists like Michael Pollan have written against the lawn (such as his 1989 article in *The New York Times Magazine*, "Why Mow? The Case Against Lawns"), and activists now speak out on the matter.

The same year as Pollan's article, environmentalist Lorrie Otto founded the "Wild Ones," an anti-grass movement that promotes the use of native plants for landscaping.

Not only does sustaining a green lawn waste water, but people tend to put too much herbicides and pesticides on their lawns, leading to toxic runoff that pollutes waterways and poisons fish. The Environmental Protection Agency states that our nation's grass requires 9 billion gallons of water a day to keep green, with nearly a third of all residential water use going toward landscaping. American households spread more herbicides per acre on their lawns than most farmers spread to grow crops. According to Ted Steinberg's book "American Green," approximately 7 million birds die each year because of lawn care pesticides.

Revelations like these have led some homeowners to reimagine what their lawn means to them. Some have done away with turf grass entirely, letting other groundcover like clover and moss take over. Some have simply diminished the amount of turf grass they take care of, supplanting it with mulch and environmentally friendly native vegetation.

One such convert is Debbie Koller, master gardener coordinator for the Chesterfield County office of the Virginia Cooperative Extension. Previously a traditionalist when it comes to grass, she's embraced the alternative since 2012.

"My lawn is very shady," she explains. "There's no way I'm going to have a good lawn, so I've convinced my husband, let's let it go to moss."

While the idea that a lawn might not be the wisest use of a yard is nothing new, it's gaining more traction in this era of renewed environmental concern around climate change. As cultural values shift, what a lawn says about Americans as a people is changing, too. In the suburbs, a turf war over grass and its place in our culture is leading to a reevaluation of what was previously considered a standard part of homeownership.

Because common turf grasses aren't native to North America, even established lawns demand constant upkeep, from fertilizer applications to watering. The Environmental Protection Agency states that America's grass requires 9 billion gallons of water a day to stay green.



Like a cowboy in the movies it cherishes, America stands alone when it comes to its lawn obsession. In the United States, the lawn has become entwined with our sacrosanct ideals of freedom and property rights; "Get off my lawn" is a cliché for a reason.

America's passion for grass is even more remarkable when you consider that the seeds for nearly all of America's turf grasses originally hail from Europe, Africa and Asia. Though considered a staple of the American lawn, even Kentucky bluegrass originates in Europe and North Asia.

Grass is no small part of our culture. In 2005, a NASA study using satellite imagery found that there were 40 million acres of lawn in the lower 48, meaning that turf grass took up about three times as much area as irrigated corn. That same year, turf grasses were the single largest irrigated crop in America.

So how did America get to a place where nearly every home maintains a nonnative plant species, spending \$20 billion on lawn care in 2009 alone?

Originally, the term "lawn" likely referred to large enclosures of naturally occurring grass in Europe where sheep and cattle could graze. In the 17th and 18th centuries, the lawn became a status symbol of the aristocracy, with wealthy estates maintaining large swaths of grass through the labor-intensive use of scythes and shears. Outdoor walkways and social areas became en vogue, and it was a show of one's wealth to maintain so much land that wasn't being used for food production or occupied by a building.



Courtesy of the Gottscho-Schleisner Collection (Library of Congress)

With the arrival of European colonists to America came livestock that quickly set about munching up all of the native grasses, chewing them to death. Through fodder, baggage and bedding, non-native grasses eventually found purchase in the foreign soil, beginning the plant's dominion over the American landscape.

Though Thomas Jefferson and George Washington maintained lawns in imitation of the European aristocracy, having large areas of cultivated grass didn't begin to take root in America until the mid-18th century. Until that point, most Americans let the dirt and native plants around their home grow in peace, aside from land maintained for a small vegetable garden.

But that began to change in 1841 when Andrew Jackson Downing published his "Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening," the first landscape-gardening book geared toward an American readership. The popular book made the case for improving front yards, importing shrubbery and "grass mown into a softness like velvet."

As the middle-class began leaving urban areas for the streetcar suburbs, landscaping suddenly became a priority. A well-maintained lawn became a symbol of success and accomplishment, and one that differentiated the clean suburbs from the dirty city.

But it wasn't until the post-World War II housing boom that lawns overtook porches as America's favorite leisure space. In that era of affordable, mass-produced housing, builders often left off the porch as a cost saving measure. Suddenly, there was a need for a new outdoor venue for relaxing and entertaining.

Constructed in the 1940s, the planned community of Levittown, New York, is considered the archetype for post-war suburbs in America. Its builders believed a well-kept lawn was a key component of a suburban community.

Though it wasn't the first and it wasn't alone, Levittown played a major role in making the lawn ubiquitous in America. Considered the prototype for the first mass-produced suburb and the archetype for postwar suburbs in America, Levittown, New York, was the handiwork of family-owned real estate development company Levitt & Sons.

Company founder and patriarch Abe Levitt was a big believer in the lawn, not only for its aesthetic appeal, but because he deemed it would help offset home depreciation. Maintaining the lawn was so important to the Levitts that they inserted a covenant to their deeds requiring that buyers trim the grass once a week between April and November.

The lessons of Levittown weren't lost on other homebuilders and their customers, and sod and seed became seen as an efficient way to provide landscaping for new homes. Even in parts of the country that would naturally be desert, lawns sprung up alongside houses, eventually leading to droughts, water rationing and fines for those who disobey them. In recent years, some localities and regions in the western states of California, Nevada and Arizona have even paid people to get rid of their lawns to help conserve water.

Neglecting one's lawn can be a source of suburban strife. Many localities have ordinances in the books that stipulate how tall grass is allowed to grow on private property. Some offenders have been met with fines, warrants and jail time for not keeping up their end of the social contract.

In Chesterfield, lawn length is prescribed under a nuisance ordinance: under 12 inches for the grass of an occupied dwelling, under 18 inches for an



Parker Michels-Boyce

The master gardener coordinator for Chesterfield County's cooperative extension office, Debbie Koller gave up having a traditional lawn in 2012. These days, her yard in the Highlands includes a blend of grass and moss, left, large mulched beds and a koi pond, below.

county's office of environmental engineering has published a guide on rain garden design and installation.

"If you have a lot of runoff from your yard or stagnant water from your yard, a rain garden can really help with that," Koller says. "You design it so that the water will collect there and then slowly go into the ground, and the plants you put in can handle these wide fluctuations in water."

Working alongside Koller is Sierra Athey, an environmental educator with the county cooperative extension. She says she's seen a gradual change in people's thinking about the traditional lawn in recent years.

"A lot of it has trickled down from the Chesapeake Bay Act, and better thinking with keeping pollutants out of our water," she says, referring to the 1988 legislation designed to improve water quality in the bay by regulating land use planning and development.

As for alternative lawns, Athey says they're slowly growing in popularity. Part of the extension's effort to promote the idea has included offering classes in sustainable landscaping; the next one

unoccupied dwelling. After a complaint is made to the county's Department of Community Enhancement, an inspector is sent out to assess the situation.

"We will probably work around 1,000 grass complaints a year," says Rich Billingsley, an inspector with the department. "That's not to say all of them are founded."

If a property owner is found out of compliance, a notice is sent, giving them 10 to 14 days to mow their land. If the grass isn't cut, a contractor is sent out to mow, and the county bills the owner.

But the problems of the lawn aren't merely aesthetic ones. Many chemicals applied to lawns have a lengthy history of harming plants, animals and humans in some cases. Fertilizer runoff contaminates streams and lakes, leading to algae blooms and polluting drinking water. Lawn chemicals often make their way into homes, building up in carpets and putting small children at risk of exposure to toxins.

Then there's the environmental impact of lawn care machinery, which burns fossil fuels. Though new EPA regulations have been put in place to help reduce emissions, a 2001 study showed that lawn mowers produced the same amount of pollution in one hour as driving a 1992 model vehicle for 650 miles. The use of a gas-powered leaf blower for 30 minutes emits as much hydrocarbon emissions as driving a car 7,700 miles at 30 mph.

And there's a direct physical impact to humans, too. According to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, more than 86,000 adults and 4,500 children were treated in emergency rooms in 2016 for lawn mower-related injuries.

When it comes to local lawn troubles, look no further than Independence Golf Club.

Following a long period of extreme cold the previous winter, a cool spring and a very rainy May and July, the grass was in such bad shape last year that Independence closed their greens at the

height of summer to rehabilitate them.

They weren't alone; that year, Magnolia Green Golf Club lost more than 7 acres to winter die-off, and Salisbury Country Club had to close one of its three nine-hole courses for more than a week because of excessive rain.

Part of the problem is that Central Virginia falls into what's called "the transition zone," meaning it's too far north for warm-weather grasses, too far south for cold-weather grasses. If you're someone who has trouble keeping your lawn pristine, it's probably not entirely your fault.

This isn't lost on Koller, the master gardener coordinator for Chesterfield's Virginia Cooperative Extension office who has let moss start reclaim her lawn. She sees plenty of people come through the extension office at Central Library, wondering why their grass won't grow.

"Fundamentally, the kinds of grasses that we try to grow here in the Richmond area are not native to this area," explains Koller, sitting at a table in the extension's conference room in August. "They're never going to take care of themselves."

Still, there are varieties that they recommend for the Virginia climate, and the office helps residents diagnose and treat their lawn woes with its Grass Roots Program. Through the program, master gardeners conduct site visits, take soil samples, and provide a detailed evaluation and recommendations for lawns.

A retired molecular geneticist and lifelong plant enthusiast, Koller says it was only after she became a master gardener that she began to rethink her lawn, which blends moss and grass.

"I was probably more of a traditional lawn person, where every blade had to be perfect," says Koller, who lives in The Highlands. "That still appeals to me aesthetically."

Acknowledging that many people still love the traditional lawn, Koller says there are ways to lessen its environmental impact. For instance, she has increased the mulched portion of her yard, meaning there's less area to maintain. She says she enjoys walking barefoot on the moss in her backyard because it's so soft.



Parker Michels-Boyce

"I just think it's pretty," Koller says. "I'm a big fan of moss, but you have to have the right conditions for moss, just like any other plant. Right plant, right place."

For those who have problems with stagnant water in their yard after it rains, Koller recommends building a rain garden. Constructed in depressed areas in the landscape, these gardens are planted with grasses and flowering perennials that work to collect and treat stormwater, reducing runoff that can carry lawn chemicals and other pollutants to local waterways. To assist homeowners, the

will take place in early 2020.

"You still have both sides," says Athey. "There are people who are dead set on having the best lawn in the neighborhood, and then you've got people that are including more of the alternative landscaping."

One person who isn't a fan of the lawn is Art Evans, a local entomologist who co-hosts the weekly radio show "What's Bugging You?" on VPM. Noting that turf isn't as conducive to insects as other types of plant life, he argues against grass and in favor of leaving leaves on the ground as habitat for bugs.



Jenny McQueen

Listen to his show and you'll hear his frequent refrain of "lose the lawn, leave the leaves."

"I hate the lawn," says Evans, who finally removed the last piece of grass from his home in Richmond's Bellevue neighborhood two years ago. "Get rid of the lawn. You spend all that time and money on watering and fertilizing and gas or electricity to keep clipping it to what end? Take it all out and do a little bit of homework. Find what plants are native to your particular area."

Stating that his message is often overshadowed by that of pest control companies who put forth the idea that "the only good bug is a dead bug," Evans says insects are important for all varieties of wildlife.

"They are the basis for food chains for all sorts of other animals that we do enjoy," Evans says. "Without 'em, we won't have 'em."

Still, Evans realizes that people take great pride in their lawns, and that some homeowners associations might take issue with someone getting rid of grass entirely.

"Having a regular mowing regimen is how people identify themselves as being good neighbors, taking care of their property, and I realize [having] no grass is not an option for everyone," he says.

As for himself, Evans has instead planted a milkweed patch to attract monarch butterflies, as well as a variety of plants that bloom at different times of year.

"It's sort of a constant parade of blooms, and the insects are attracted to those and the birds are attracted to those," he says. "We like it, and our neighbors seem to like it too, even though most of them have lawns."

With its lack of yards and emphasis on blending in homes with the existing trees and topography, Brandermill was an early embracer of the alternative lawn in the 1970s.

Borrowing ideas from similar communities in Reston and Columbia, Maryland, the original environmental and design guidelines for Brandermill state that "Buildings should not be treated as architectural entities dropped onto their sites, but rather as carefully planned additions to their natural settings."

But it seems even Brandermill couldn't escape the market demand for turf. Later additions to the community have been designed with lawns, including Robin Hulbert's home in the Harbour Pointe subdivision.

When Hulbert and her husband, Jeff Weller, built their house in 1991, they initially had a standard parcel of turf. Over the years, though, their shady yard became even shadier as the trees around it grew, making it harder to keep up the grass. She eventually gave up about a decade ago.

"I used to buy those little rolls of sod to try to supplement," she says, standing in a front yard now filled with native plants, including abelia, salvia and Joe-Pye weed. "The biggest challenge to me [of a lawn] is that they just take so much maintenance. It's not just mowing, it's the fertilizer that's required, a lot of water is required. They don't really do anything for our ecosystem, in terms of they don't support any of our local critters, whether it's worms, insects, birds."

Eventually, she decided the time and expense of maintaining the lawn wasn't

worth it, and let it go wild. After retiring as a clinical psychologist who worked in the prison system seven years ago, Hulbert became a master gardener through the cooperative extension. Now, her alternative lawn is a plant-filled oasis visited by hummingbirds, butterflies, turtles, frogs and other wildlife.

"The more I learned [about lawns], the more it reinforced my decision," says Hulbert as a hummingbird dips its beak into a blue salvia flower, beating its wings dozens of times per second to stay airborne. "They're bulking up right now. They're getting ready to head south."

Hulbert says she usually enjoys her front yard multiple times a day, tidying up in the morning when she gets the paper, sitting on her porch in the late afternoon, or getting her hands dirty for some

"hardcore maintenance."

Though drastically different from the 1950s idea of a lawn, the benefit Hulbert receives from her front yard is the same: a beautiful outdoor space where she can relax.

"It makes me feel happy to be out here," she says. "[It's] calming when the world gets a little bit too nuts."

Robin Hulbert used to buy rolls of sod to supplement her shade-plagued Brandermill lawn, but after retiring and becoming a master gardener, she began to rethink her approach. Now her property is an oasis of native plants frequented by wildlife.



Jenny McQueen

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BUILD AN URBAN
OASIS? Page 9



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ASH DANIEL

Up from slavery

*For four decades,
Chesterfield led Virginia's slave trade*

BY RICH GRISET STAFF WRITER

A descendant of Virginia slaves, Rev. Herbert Townes stands at Bermuda Hundred, an area of land where the James and Appomattox rivers meet that served as a major entry point for enslaved Africans in the 18th century.

The trip out to the area of Bermuda Hundred is more than a journey of distance; it's also one of time.

Traverse the series of two-lane country roads, past the low-slung houses and the massive factories of Dupont and Philip Morris, and the decades fall away, bringing you to a finger of land where the James and Appomattox rivers meet, a place whose history extends as far back as American history was recorded.

For at least 10,000 years, Native Americans dwelled on or near this peninsula; the Appamattuck tribe had a town here that numbered approximately 380 when the English first came up the newly named James River in 1607. Four years later, Sir Thomas Dale would establish the colony of Henricus at nearby Farrar's Island; shortly thereafter, he would drive the natives from their land and establish Bermuda Hundred, located at the easternmost part of modern Chesterfield County.

It's here that John Rolfe may have grown his first marketable tobacco, cultivating a West Indian strain of the plant in Virginian soil and sparking the fledgling colony's

See **BERMUDA HUNDRED** on page 6

Republicans seek to bridge experience gap

Incumbents step aside,
opening door for new candidates

BY JIM McCONNELL SENIOR WRITER

Now that Dorothy Jaekle and Steve Elswick have decided not to run for re-election to the Chesterfield Board of Supervisors (see news brief, Page 2), the race is under way to determine which Republican candidates will attempt to succeed them in November.

Jaekle, the Bermuda District's representative on the board since 2007, informed the Observer last Wednesday that she will not seek

See **BOARD OF SUPERVISORS** on page 5



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BERMUDA HUNDRED *from page 1*

tobacco boom. Later, this land would serve as the battleground for a series of skirmishes during the Civil War.

Visit Bermuda Hundred and you'll find scant trace of this rich history. In the quiet of winter, the flat land and barren trees emphasize the feeling that this is a neglected place, but for Rev. Herbert Townes, Bermuda Hundred is charged with a special kind of energy. Though the 72-year-old has spent nearly his entire life in the far western portion of Chesterfield once known as Hallsboro, he feels a connection to this plot of land.

Townes, a retired postal worker and chair of the Chesterfield Historical Society of Virginia's African-American History Committee, can trace his roots on his father's side back to a farm in Amelia County where his paternal great-grandfather, Henderson Townes, was born into slavery in 1842 to his great-great-grandfather, Jack. But, as often happens with African-American genealogy, the trail stops cold here. Though the British kept meticulous ledgers of slaves transported and sold, they often only include the number of slaves and the name of a ship.

But through his research, Townes stumbled upon a surprising piece of history: For four decades, Chesterfield County was the leading debarkation point for African-born slaves in Virginia. Records show that at least 16,000 enslaved Africans landed in what's now Chesterfield between 1698 and 1774. Though Townes doesn't know for certain, this may be the place where his ancestors entered America.

Like so much of our country's racial history, uncovering the truth about Bermuda Hundred and its role in the slave trade takes some digging. It's a history seldom discussed outside a handful of historians.

This exploration comes at an uncomfortable time. Not only did Virginia make international headlines this month after the governor and attorney general admitted they dressed in blackface decades ago, but 2019 is the 400th anniversary of the first enslaved Africans arriving in America, landing at what is now the decommissioned Army base at Fort Monroe in Hampton.

As our state reckons publicly with its own relationship with race, Townes has made it his mission to bring Bermuda Hundred's forgotten history to the fore.

Though he wasn't always the biggest history buff, Townes' interest in the subject was piqued during a conversation with strangers around a hibachi grill.

Roughly 40 years ago, Townes and his wife sat next to a group of white strangers at a communal table in a Japanese steakhouse on Broad Street. Over dinner, the strangers began discussing their ancestry, mentioning their Italian, English and other European lineages. All Townes knew was that he was from Hallsboro, a former mill town located within the boundary of Chesterfield. The episode inspired him to learn all he could about his ancestors.

Since then, he's delved into his



ASH DANIEL

A Chesterfield native and chair of the Chesterfield Historical Society of Virginia's African-American History Committee, Rev. Herbert Townes believes his enslaved ancestors may have disembarked at Bermuda Hundred more than 200 years ago. Townes has worked to raise awareness about the area's slave history.

family's genealogy and now feels a sense of purpose in setting the record straight about the African-American experience.

"We want to honor our ancestors because they've been so dishonored," says Townes, mentioning the Ku-Klux-Klan-glorifying 1915 film "Birth of a Nation" as an example of how views of race have been historically distorted.

Through his research, he came across the history of slavery in the region, and Chesterfield's role in the transatlantic slave trade.

"There's a good possibility that they may have been purchased at Bermuda Hundred," says Townes of his ancestors. "It's just mind-boggling."

Last week, Townes delivered a lecture at Lucy Corr Village about his findings, having researched scholarly articles, manifests of seafaring slave ships and old advertisements for slave auctions in the *Virginia Gazette*.

He opened his presentation with a photo of a "door of no return," a term for the last doorway African slaves passed through when they left their home continent forever; Townes visited a similar door in 2002 during a seminary trip to Ghana.

For Townes, this research is his own way of finishing the trip begun by his ancestors on the shores of Africa more than a century and a half ago.

"It's almost the completion of a journey," he says.

Though the first documented African slaves in America – "20 and odd Negroes" who had been captured from a Spanish slave ship and were traded for supplies – came to what is now Hampton in 1619, servitude in Virginia predates that. In the beginning decades of the colony, most laborers were white indentured servants.

As explained in Rev. Ben Campbell's book "Richmond's Unhealed History," mortality was extremely high in Virginia's early days; by 1624, there were only 1,200 Englishmen, even though 3,500 settlers had arrived over the previous five years. With a high mortality rate and the cash crop of tobacco demanding ever more labor, the Virginia Company established a "headright" system in 1616 to assist with the labor problem.

Essentially, anyone who paid their own way to the new colony would be given 50 acres of land; anyone who paid for someone else to come to the colony would be given 50 acres of their own, and would have that person bound to work for them for seven years, Campbell writes.

These English "servants" frequently died, could be bought and sold, and often had their period of bondage extended for various reasons. And even if the servants died, their owners would keep the land, creating massive estates for landowners. Because of the land incentive and the available supply of cheaper English

workers, the African slave population was relatively small, numbering 500 to 1,000 by 1660, according to Campbell's book. In the first 50 years of the Virginia colony, 90 percent of the population was in bondage, nearly all white.

"In the earliest years of the colony, there were far more white indentured servants," says Gregg Kimball, director of public services and outreach for the Library of Virginia and author of "American City, Southern Place: A Cultural History of Antebellum Richmond." "It was really in the 1660s and 1670s that that started to change."

In the latter two decades of the 17th century, Virginia began to switch to African labor. Scholars debate why this took place; one factor may have been that the improving economy in England meant fewer people agreed to become indentured servants.

Another theory posits that a turning point was Bacon's Rebellion, a 1676 revolt that saw freedmen, white servants and black slaves chase Gov. William Berkeley out of the capital at Jamestown and torch the settlement. Some scholars state that the rebellion led to the redefinition of race in North America. Changes to the law benefited whites and stated that people of African descent were hereditary slaves.

Though Virginia law had already begun defining differences between black slaves and white servants in 1661, it was in 1705 that the House of Burgesses would

create a separate slave code. “An Act concerning Servants and Slaves” draws distinct classes, one of “Christian white servant” and one of “slave,” each with their own categories of bondage. The act was the first time the word “white” had been included in Virginia law.

“They really decide that they want to have white servants have more privilege than negro slaves,” Campbell says.

The need to define the distinctions followed a rise in population of those of African descent, which doubled from roughly 3,000 to 6,000 between 1680 and 1700, then jumped to 60,000 by 1740, according to Campbell. During the major period of forced African migration to Virginia – from 1698 through 1774 – an estimated 114,000 Africans were imported, landing along the waterways of Virginia.

Bermuda Hundred held the customs house for the “Upper James,” one of the five customs districts created by the British government. The Upper James district was the primary end of ship traffic from Africa because it concluded the James River’s broad sailing channel, Campbell points out in his book. Traveling further up the James toward Richmond, a ship would encounter a series of five dramatic turns, sandbars and tall trees, which made it difficult to sail.

Henricus, located on the fourth curl to make it a better defense against the Spanish, was harder to get to. Osborne’s, a nearby wharf also located in what is now Chesterfield, was a secondary point for enslaved Africans entering Virginia, Campbell writes.

Only 400 Africans were recorded as disembarking from the Upper James district before 1735, but that number soon increased dramatically. In 1746, one-third of Africans coming to Virginia disembarked at either Bermuda Hundred or Osborne’s. Though not a full accounting, Campbell’s book indicates that between 1731 and 1774, 127 ships originating from Bristol and Liverpool brought nearly 16,000 Africans to Virginia. During this four-decade period, the majority of African slaves coming to Virginia landed in Chesterfield.

“They all come to Bermuda Hundred, with the exception of a few that go further up to Osborne’s,” Campbell says.

After disembarking, the slaves were likely either purchased by their owners at Bermuda Hundred or bought for subsequent resale elsewhere in the Piedmont region. For African-Americans who can trace their lineage back to the Piedmont area during this time, it’s probable that their ancestors got off the boat in Chesterfield.

A factor in the movement of imported slaves further up the James from Hampton Roads is that by about 1735, the Tidewater plantations had already

purchased the slaves they needed, and many of those slaves had produced children, according to Campbell. The

Piedmont area also needed the labor, as the period saw a growth in tobacco, corn and wheat harvesting.

In 1774, Virginia eliminated any further importation of African slaves out of worry that the value of their current slaves would depreciate, concern of a slave revolt and anger toward the British who ran the slave trade. In 1807, America followed suit, abolishing its role in importing slaves but allowing the domestic

trade of slaves to continue.

It was during this period that Richmond’s slave market would become one of the largest in the country; an estimated 300,000 to 350,000 slaves were sold out of Virginia in the three decades before the close of the Civil War, most of them passing through Shockoe Bottom’s auction houses.

“You had this enormous second system that develops in the United States,” Kimball says. “By 1860, Virginia has the largest slave operation in the United States, and the United States has the largest slave population of anywhere in the world.”

“For 135 years, Virginia acted as if there was no slave trade. It’s astounding in how Virginia has succeeded in not talking about it.”

– Rev. Ben Campbell, author of “Richmond’s Unhealed History”

Standing in the crisp February air at Bermuda Hundred, Herbert Townes is taken aback by what he sees.

Aside from two placards commemorating the area’s role in the Civil War, there’s little physical evidence of this area’s history. But on private land near the river’s edge stands a wooden archway, erected by the landowner for her daughter’s wedding a few years ago. Townes can’t help but see in it a mirror-image of the doorway in Ghana – the door of no return.

“This could be a full circle moment,” Townes says. “To come here and know that they got off the ship here, there is a good feeling.”

As for why Bermuda Hundred’s slave past has received so little public recognition, Campbell notes that it’s only been in the past two decades that people have learned about Richmond’s slave market, even though Richmond’s trade once reached the equivalent of \$100 million annually in today’s dollars.

“For 135 years, Virginia acted as if there was no slave trade,” he says. “It’s astounding in how Virginia has succeeded in not talking about it.”

Though Richmond has a slave trail to commemorate this history, Bermuda Hundred has nary a sign of this dark chapter in its history.

“I can’t believe that Bermuda Hundred’s not a park,” Campbell says. “The history there is massive, of enormous importance, and I think it’s just very slowly being told. Virginia has lived with race as if it never had to be talked about. The stories were hidden.” ■



Stratton Park Pedestrian Improvement Project
from Ridgedale Parkway, 0.3 Miles West of Ironbridge Road to Ronson Road
Chesterfield County

Design Public Hearing

Thursday, March 7, 2019, 5:00 p.m. – 7:00 p.m. *

J. G. Hening Elementary School

5230 Chicora Drive

North Chesterfield, VA 23234

***If the school is closed for any reason, the hearing will be canceled and rescheduled.**

County representatives will be available to review and discuss the proposed project plans, studies, and property acquisition procedures for the Stratton Park Pedestrian Improvement Project. Plans have been developed for the construction of sidewalk along Ridgedale Parkway from 0.3 miles west of Ironbridge Road (Chippenham Crossing Drive) to Stratton Park and a shared use asphalt path from Stratton Park to Ronson Road. The project includes concrete sidewalks, asphalt paths, pedestrian bridges, curbing, timber fencing and storm water management features.

Information about the project is also available from Chesterfield County’s Transportation Department located at 9800 Government Center Parkway, Chesterfield, Virginia 23832, (804) 748-1037 or TDD/TTY 711; please call ahead to ensure that the appropriate personnel are available to answer your questions.

Provide your written or oral comments at the hearing, anytime between 5:00 p.m. and 7:00 p.m., or submit written comments by March 17, 2019 to Nate Mathis, PE, Chesterfield County Transportation Department; P.O. Box 40; Chesterfield, VA 23832 or transportation@chesterfield.gov.

Chesterfield County and the Virginia Department of Transportation ensures nondiscrimination and equal employment in all programs and activities in accordance with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. If you need more information or special assistance for persons with disabilities or limited English proficiency, contact Chesterfield County Transportation Department at (804) 748-1037 or TDD/TTY 711.

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Developer facing trial for felony embezzlement

Critics of Woolridge case seek deferral

BY JIM McCONNELL SENIOR WRITER

Opponents of a proposed development on Woolridge Road are now asking Chesterfield's Board of Supervisors to defer its decision on the zoning case until the project's developer has his day in court – for felony embezzlement.

Donald J. Balzer Jr., 63, goes on trial next week to face allegations that he illegally took money from his family's trust. He was indicted by a Powhatan County grand jury last August on two felony counts.

Balzer's trial is set for Jan. 24 – one day after the Chesterfield Board of Supervisors is scheduled to consider his application to rezone 104 acres along the banks of the Swift Creek

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DINER'S DELIGHT OLD STANDBYS SHINE AT YEN CHING ON HULL

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JENNY McQUEEN



COURTESY OF WOW

QUEEN OF THE JUNGLE

Chesterfield's wrestling dynamo, Erica Porter, prepares to take flight

BY RICH GRISET STAFF WRITER

Women of Wrestling's Jungle Grrrl executes her finishing move, The Splash, against her opponent, the All Natural Khloe Hurtz in 2016. Outside the ring, Erica Porter is a fitness instructor in Chesterfield.

Witnessing the muscular, 5-foot-7 woman soar through the air, David McLane knew in an instant she was Jungle Grrrl.

It was the second day of training for his new syndicated women's wrestling TV show "Women of Wrestling" – or "WOW" – when McLane saw a fresh recruit effortlessly leap from the wrestling ring to three rows in front of her, then jump backward onto a crash pad. The feat stunned McLane, reminding him of the airborne athleticism of World Wrestling Federation legend Jimmy "Superfly" Snuka.

"That was it," recalls McLane, who founded WOW in 2000 with Los Angeles Lakers owner Jeanie Buss. "I hit my hand on the mat and said, 'That's Jungle Grrrl.'"

In real life, the newly dubbed wrestler was

Erica Porter, a not-so-mild-mannered fitness instructor who had come to WOW's open audition unsure of what she was getting into. Wrestling would soon become a constant in her life.

Hundreds of matches and one World Champion title later, the 44-year-old Chesterfield resident shows no signs of stopping. In fact, Porter is about to go bigger than ever when AXS TV begins airing WOW's new season, beginning this Friday. This season's initial eight episodes will be the first time WOW is aired as part of a network's programming, giving Porter and WOW a platform like never before.

With the Netflix women's wrestling TV show "GLOW" – a fictional series based on McLane's

See **WRESTLING** on page 5



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WRESTLING from page 1



JENNY McQUEEN

1980s venture “Gorgeous Ladies of Wrestling” – stoking interest among a new generation of fans since it debuted in 2017, all involved are hoping WOW will reach new levels of popularity, and make Porter an even bigger star.

Growing up in Maryland, Porter knew from an early age she was different. For one, she says, she didn’t want to be the pretty girl, noting that looks fade over time. She also didn’t care for the athletic opportunities available to girls at the time, especially team sports where she might not be matched with teammates as competitive as she was.

Still, she was attracted to dancing, and attended Pittsburgh’s Point Park University to pursue the performing arts. Being told by a teacher that she was too fat to be a dancer launched Porter’s obsession with the human body, inspiring her to become a certified fitness instructor at the age of 18.

“I really liked that you had the ability to transform yourself, really more mentally than physically,” she says.

After graduating in 1996, Porter moved to Los Angeles at the age of 20 in the hopes of becoming a professional dancer. That career move didn’t work out, but she found plenty of employment as a fitness instructor. She’d largely given up her performance aspirations when multiple people told her about an audition for a superhero show that needed athletic women.

It was only after arriving at the audition that Porter and others learned it was actually for a women’s wrestling TV show. Porter was intrigued.

In an audition room full of hundreds of Pamela Anderson lookalikes, Porter’s muscular physique, wavy dark hair and coloring reflective of her South American lineage instantly stood out to producers. After being offered the gig – and dubbed Jungle Grrrl by McLane – Porter and other women spent the next four months quickly learning the ropes from two wrestling trainers.

“It was hours of training every day. When we first started, I couldn’t move,” she said of the all-encompassing soreness. “It was far more athletic than I ever gave it credit for.”

As matches can run anywhere from 10 to 30 minutes, Porter says hitting the ring takes an intense amount of focus, endurance and trust in your wrestling partner.

“When you’re in the ring, it’s a dance,” she says. “You are literally putting your life in someone else’s hands.”

By all accounts, Porter was a natural, fearlessly climbing the ropes and performing crowd-pleasing aerial maneuvers, including diving from the top of the ropes and jumping off the wrestling mat. Two of her signature moves include the body slam-like Jungle Driver and The Splash, a finishing move where Porter jumps from the top turnbuckle onto her opponent on the mat.

“That was very natural,” she says. “I wanted to do big movements. I was powerful, and I wanted to fight and climb.”

Porter’s first televised match took place at The Forum in Los Angeles in September 2000. Stepping into the ring made her nervous, but she said it was also the most alive she’d ever felt in her life.

“I had never been on a platform like that,” she says. “That was scary. More than that, it was hard.”

While Porter became a wrestling star, WOW fell on tough times, ceasing television production after completing

Porter strikes a pose at Endorphasm, her own gym off of Hull Street Road.

Jungle Grrrl mid-fight with Santana Garrett in late 2016. This triple threat match would see Jungle Grrrl lose her World Champion title on a technicality.



COURTESY OF WOW

24 episodes in 2001. For the next 11 years, only untelevised WOW matches took place, though some were streamed on digital platforms.

Porter continued to compete with WOW and took other wrestling gigs in Los Angeles, Las Vegas and on tour. She also participated in USO tours, traveling to South Korea and Guam to entertain the troops a little over a decade ago.

In 2012, WOW returned to television, and Porter came along with it. To date, she estimates she’s appeared in 48 syndicated shows, including one where she became WOW’s World Champion in 2013.

“You could not have told me that I wasn’t champion of the world in that moment,” she says. “It’s a real honor to hold the title, because the company entrusts you. There is a respect that comes with it.”

Part of Jungle Grrrl’s identity is that she’s never lost a fight by being pinned; when she lost her title in 2016, it was during a triple threat match while she was out of the ring, a loss on a technicality.

“It’s a giant soap opera,” Porter says. “You have strong women who are up there, kicking ass.”

When the first episode of the new season airs Friday, Porter’s first match will be the main event, a World Champion Match between her and Santana Garrett, the wrestler who took her title two years ago. While noting that she’s old enough to be the mother of some of her fellow wrestlers, Porter is excited to be back in the ring.

Filming this season’s eight episodes in October in Los Angeles, Porter was pleased to encounter fans who had been by her side since she began her wrestling career in 2000. Though currently at peak physical fitness – she has chiseled arms that would put any action hero to shame – she acknowledges that it can’t go on forever.

“You realize that the end is not so far off, and that is a hard pill to swallow,” she says.

Carlo Vernieri, Porter’s husband, wasn’t originally sold on her wrestling career. The two had been dating two years when she surprised him with the news that she’d been hired by WOW.

“That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard. I’m not dating a professional wrestler,” he said at the time.

Her response: “It’s been nice knowing you.”

Vernieri changed his tune after attending her first match, and now considers himself a “superfan.” A firefighter in Henrico, he now regularly brings coworkers to matches to root for his wife.

“My lieutenant is the biggest wrestling fan ever,” Vernieri says. “He was star-struck” upon meeting Porter.

In November 2017, a large group from Central Virginia traveled to Winston-Salem, North Carolina, for that year’s WrestleCade SuperShow, a weekend-long wrestling event in which Porter was competing. Jungle Grrrl’s fans were so loud they were asked to calm down. “I could hear them from all the way in the back,” Porter says.

Porter and Vernieri’s 9-year-old son, Carlo, has also gotten in on the action. With a mane of long blonde hair, “Jungle Boy” is now a fixture at Jungle Grrrl’s fights.

After bouncing around New York and California, the family settled in Chesterfield in 2009 because they were looking for a nice place to put down roots. Porter said it took some adjustment coming to Central Virginia, but now loves it here and runs her own gym in the county. The family lives near Grange Hall Elementary, where Jungle Boy goes to school. When she isn’t wrestling, Porter is busy running Endorphasm, her own high-intensity gym tucked away on the back end of a shopping strip near the intersection of Hull Street and Turner roads.

Both Porter and Vernieri credit McLane and his persistence for getting WOW on AXS TV – a channel owned by Dallas Mavericks owner Mark Cuban – and thank him for sticking by Jungle Grrrl for 18 years.

“He’s very loyal, and very sincere, which is pretty rare in Hollywood,” Vernieri says.

McLane, a lifelong wrestling enthusiast, created “GLOW” in the 1980s because he thought women’s wrestling needed a bigger platform. Frustrated with lingerie and pillow matches that were taking place at other wrestling outfits, McLane wanted women’s professional wrestling to match the caliber of their male counterparts.

In the original show, McLane appeared in a tuxedo, giving a play by play of matches, serving as ring announcer and acting in comedic sketches. In the Netflix series the character of producer Bash Howard is said to be inspired by McLane. Through all of WOW, Porter has been a constant.

“She’s a champion in all rights, from owning her own gym to wrestling, to helping people have wellness,” says McLane.

He encourages people to tune in on Friday. “It’s going to be a great night of wrestling,” McLane says.

In addition to watching her on AXS TV, Porter’s fans can flock to Capital Ale House in Midlothian every Friday from Jan. 18 through March 8 to attend viewing parties for each WOW episode. Porter will be present at each event.

Reflecting on an 18-year career that has included television appearances and traveling the world, Porter is very pleased with her surprise career in wrestling.

“I wouldn’t take any of it back,” she says. “I could do this every day for the rest of my life.” ■