

Tazewell County, Virginia

Va. man accused of liquor store robbery and taking officer's gun

BY JOE TENNIS
BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

A Virginia man has been jailed on several charges after police say he robbed a liquor store and stole a policeman's gun Sunday afternoon in Tazewell County, Virginia.

The incident occurred at around 12:45 p.m. Sunday when a man walked into the ABC store at Pounding Mill, Virginia, showed what appeared to be a handgun and then fled, said Major Harold Heatley, chief deputy for the Tazewell County Sheriff's Office.

Officers from Tazewell County and the Virginia State Police immediately began searching the area. An officer from the Virginia Department

of Game and Inland Fisheries and Virginia ABC also assisted on the scene, Heatley said.

Leaving the ABC store, the suspect drove a silver, older-model Ford Escape about 17 miles east on U.S. Highway 460, according to Heatley.

"At some point, he ran out of gas, just east of the town of Tazewell," Heatley said. "A deputy saw him on the side of the road, and he was holding a gas can."

As the deputy apprehended the man, the suspect attacked the deputy and "got in a tussle," Heatley said. "It was a pretty significant fight. They fought for a while."

That deputy suffered "some scrapes and bruises" before the suspect fled in the Ford

Escape with the officer's gun, Heatley said.

About 40 minutes later, a trooper with the West Virginia State Police spotted the Ford Escape and started a pursuit — until the vehicle wrecked off Old Bramwell Road at Bluefield, West Virginia, and the suspect was taken into custody, Heatley said.

Money, along with the deputy's stolen weapon, was recovered, according to Heatley.

The suspect, Joshua Klimatis, age unknown, of Roanoke Virginia, is now jailed and is



Klimatis

being charged by the Tazewell County Sheriff's Office with assault on an officer, armed robbery, disarming a law enforcement officer, and felony elude, Heatley said.

"Other charges are also being looked at," Heatley said. "He is custody, and he is not being released."

The suspect had gotten away with \$74 from the ABC store, "as best as they can tell," Heatley said.

The handgun used in the robbery, however, was actually an airsoft gun, Heatley added. "And that's what he used to rob the ABC store."

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Jail tales

My teaching at the Bristol Jail two nights a week for nearly a quarter of a century ranks among the most memorable and rewarding times of my life. I saw the worst — and the best — that human nature can offer. I will share with you some short stories from three of



Ben Talley

Education Beat

the good souls I came to know there.

» **Tony** suffered from schizophrenia. No, he didn't have his medicine. There is a huge breakdown in our health care system for the indigent mentally ill, a group who number in the untold millions in this country. It costs us, as a nation, far

more to leave them untreated than to simply meet their basic needs and give them the opportunity to join the work force. Ah, but that is a topic for another column.

When Tony got on a delusional roll, he was fond of telling all who would listen (and in a tightly packed little room, how do you get away?) that he had been Martha Washington in a previous life. No, not George. Martha. He was good at math and a friendly soul so I called him out each week into the library to help me teach other inmates. I think I got more students than I might have during this time because they all enjoyed listening to George — uh, I mean Martha — tell tales about early America.

» **Jamaal** was hyper-tempered and always looking for a reason to get rid of his deeply immense anger. He had been clubbed, knifed and shot (each more than once) during his time here on Earth. Violence was all he had been given. In turn, it was generally all he gave to those around him. Pain meant little or nothing to him. But respect did. And in inmate society, respect means you "don't take crap" from anybody.

Well, Jamaal was giving me "crap" one day. He had been on a diatribe for nearly an hour, spouting off about how I had to be racist when away from the jail because I was "a good ol' white boy." I responded with evidence and logic, neither of which worked with Jamaal.

Then for some reason I snapped. No, I did not make a habit of this, or I would not be typing these words. Losing one's cool when surrounded by jail inmates, some whom maintain a propensity to maim or murder, does not contribute to one's chances of longevity.

I practically leaped across the table at Jamaal. I got up inches from his face. "Jamaal, you talk about how I judge people and you sit there judging me, with no evidence at all! You don't know what the ___ you're talkin' about. Stop it right now!"

I never carried a pistol at the jail, nor even a walkie-talkie. I wanted the inmates to see that I trusted them, and that I was never ready to incite physical harm or "tell" on them in any way.

Jamaal, who had muscles on top of muscles, stood up and towered over me. Then he picked me up and gave me a hug. "Mr. T., my man, you are right. I won't talk about you like that again." And so far as I ever heard, he was true to his word.

» **Chris** was not only the most intelligent inmate I ever taught, but he was possibly the most intelligent person I ever met. He was a drifter from Pennsylvania, and helped himself to some goods from a local store one night while passing through here. No, he didn't pay for the goods.

Chris loved to read. So I gave him a copy of the great novel, "Les Miserables." He read the 1,500 pages in only a few days. One evening we were discussing the exploits of the main character, Jean Valjean; particularly his great escape from danger straight up the corner of a high wall in Paris.

Later that week when I came to teach at the jail, the deputy on duty told me Chris had escaped by scaling up the corner of the wall out in the courtyard, jumped off the roof, and leaped onto a train that happened to be passing nearby. Yes, he was soon apprehended and returned. No, I didn't get into trouble for unwittingly helping him plot his great escape.

Ben Talley is an inductee into the National Teachers Hall of Fame, a former Virginia Teacher of the Year, and a McGlothlin Award Winner for Teaching Excellence.

HUNGRY MOTHER RESERVOIR



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Fisheries technician Chanz Hopkins (left), of the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, talks to VHCC students Nathan Ferguson (center) and Kalin Davis explaining how the dace ear bone indicates the age of the fish.

Boning up on fish tales

VHCC students dissect non-native fish to study habitat changes

BY CAROLYN R. WILSON
SPECIAL TO THE HERALD COURIER

A BINGDON, Va. — Students at Virginia Highlands Community College are learning that fish bones can be good storytellers.

Nearly 40 students — not all of them biology majors — dissected fish recently in search of a special type of ear bone called an otolith, which can reveal the age of fish.

The purpose of the research project is to learn more about the population growth of the mountain redbelly dace, a fish that has been discovered in the streams at Hungry Mother State Park that is not native to the area.

Its presence there has worried some conservationists, who hope to preserve native fish populations by keeping the mountain redbelly dace confined to its natural habitats.

The project is an ongoing collaboration with the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation and Virginia Highlands Community College.

According to Dr. Kevin Hamed, a biology instructor at the community college who is leading the study, efforts have been made in the past two years



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

A student dissects the dace to locate the ear bone. Dissecting to measure the ear bone will tell researchers whether the dace population is under control.

to collect and remove mountain redbelly dace from an unnamed tributary that feeds into Hungry Mother Reservoir. While mountain redbelly dace are abundant in other river systems in Virginia, North Carolina and West

Virginia, they have occasionally made their way into other ecosystems, likely with the help of fishermen who use them as live bait.

See **FISH**, Page A9

Bristol Al Fresco

City considers dining area on downtown Sixth Street

BY LEIF GREISS
BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

BRISTOL, Tenn. — To increase foot traffic downtown, Bristol, Tennessee, officials hope to turn a section of Sixth Street into a downtown dining strip.

At its work session at 5:30 tonight, Bristol Tennessee City Council will look at plans to create an outdoor dining strip on the section of downtown Sixth Street between State and Shelby streets. The move was recommended by a downtown development strategy commissioned

by the city, which singled out that section of downtown as a prime area for an outdoor dining and cafe strip because of the appearance and profile of its historic buildings.

City Manager Bill Sorah said the dining strip will provide better outdoor seating options to existing businesses and hopefully spur the opening of restaurants or cafes along that section of Sixth Street.

To add the dining strip, the city would eliminate nine existing parking spaces along the eastern sidewalk and widen a section of Sixth

Street's western sidewalk from the Angry Italian restaurant to Top Hat Magic Supply from 5 feet to 12 feet. Six parking spots along Sharing Christ Worship Center would not be affected.

"I'm very excited — it is only going to increase foot traffic to Sixth Street," said Keith Yonker, owner of the Angry Italian. "This is going to show there's more to Bristol than State Street; there's places on the side streets as well."

If the city moves forward with the project, Yonker said he would

add six to eight tables for outside dining, as well as possibly adding a partition and extending an awning over the dining area. The changes should make that section of Sixth Street safer by forcing drivers to slow down, he added.

Michael Peck, one of the co-owners of Elderbrew, a brewery and taproom on Sixth Street, said the strip would be a welcome addition and put Sixth Street on the radar of more people.

However, Dave Vaught, the owner of Top Hat Magic Supply, said he

doesn't expect to the addition of the dining strip or the removal of parking spaces to affect his specialty shop.

Sorah said \$20,000 is already budgeted to complete the project, and the city will perform all work. He said he expects work to begin in mid-July with the project completed by mid-August. The work on Sixth Street would not block traffic most of the time, the city manager said.

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Bristol Virginia City Council



ANDRE TEAGUE/BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

The Bristol Virginia City Council is looking at proposed new fines for feeding ducks and geese on city property.

Duck and dodge: Council may ban waterfowl feeding

BY DAVID MCGEE
BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

BRISTOL, Va. — In a year marked by budget issues, school funding concerns and higher landfill costs, city leaders will tackle a different kind of challenge tonight — waterfowl waste.

At its meeting tonight, City Council will hold the first of two readings of an ordinance that would make it illegal to feed ducks and geese. The ordinance would cover "migratory and non-migratory waterfowl" defined as "native, non-native and domestic ducks and geese and any crossbreeds or hybrids of these birds."

The ordinance is in response to health concerns at Cumberland Square Park and other facilities, City Manager Randy Eads said Monday.

"What we're seeing throughout the city at our parks and ballparks is a lot of waterfowl excrement. We don't have the problem in areas where people aren't feeding the waterfowl," Eads said. "We're going to try to discourage people from feeding waterfowl in hopes they'll find other sources of food."

If approved, violators would be subject to a \$50 fine, but only if signs prohibiting feeding are posted in the immediate area and a law enforcement officer has "provided a prior warning that continued feeding of wildlife will result in a violation."

Eads said Cumberland Square Park, which is adjacent to Beaver Creek, is the most affected, followed by Eastern Little League. "We've got to do something. Cumberland Square Park is really bad — it's almost unusable," Eads said.

The park is used for an array of public activities, including the upcoming Fourth of July celebration.

The prohibition is permitted under regulations established by the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries.

"Any locality may prohibit by ordinance the feeding of migratory and non-migratory waterfowl in any subdivision or other area of such locality which, in the opinion of the governing body, is so heavily populated as to make the feeding of such waterfowl a threat to public health or the environment," according to the state department, which also prescribes the maximum fine at \$50.

Other Virginia localities, including Virginia Beach, Fairfax, Bedford County, Campbell County and the area around Smith Mountain Lake, enacted similar measures.

Humans feeding waterfowl can cause a myriad of issues, according to Dave McRuer, the former director of wildlife medicine at the Wildlife Center of Virginia in Waynesboro.

"Supplemental feeding of wild waterfowl has several negative consequences that might not be readily apparent to the average citizen," McRuer wrote in a paper published on the Wildlife Center's website. "These repercussions may impact not only the ducks and geese but also the regional environment and public health."

Potential impacts of feeding waterfowl include overcrowding in areas where humans typically provide food, habitat degradation due to the unusually large numbers — including more feces and declining water quality — disease among waterfowl, dietary and nutrition problems and altered migration patterns.

"The best solution for waterfowl problems situated around public parks is to stop all forms of supplemental feeding," McRuer wrote.

The meeting begins at 6 p.m. at City Hall, 300 Lee St.

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HERE THERE BE DRAGONS



ANDRE TEAGUE/BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

A dragonfly perches on a stem after a rain shower Monday afternoon in Bristol, Virginia. Read more details about the weekly forecast on **Page A10**, or follow all the latest weather developments on HeraldCourier.com.

Briefly

Third MeadowView shooting suspect in custody

KINGSPORT, Tenn. — A third suspect has been charged in a June 8 shooting at MeadowView Convention Center in Kingsport, city police said Monday.

Matthew Phillips, 29, was arrested just before midnight Sunday during a traffic stop on U.S. Highway 11W in Hawkins County, according to a news release. He was turned over to the Kingsport Police Department and transported to the city jail, where he remains on \$500,000 bail.

Authorities previously said Phillips and two others, Deonte Bristol and Brittany Stafford, were involved in an attempted robbery inside a hotel room that resulted in one man being shot. He was treated and released.

Phillips is charged with attempted second-degree murder, aggravated kidnapping and aggravated robbery.

Tom Steyer says he'll use \$1M to engage Virginia millennials

RICHMOND, Va. — Billionaire investor and Democratic activist Tom Steyer says he will put \$1 million toward registering at least 12,000 millennial voters in Virginia, in hope of flipping the Republican-led General Assembly to the Democrats.

The Washington Post reports that the liberal advocacy group Steyer founded, NextGen America, announced Monday that it will reach out to voters aged 18 to 35 in some of Virginia's Republican-held districts and focus on the key issues of gun safety, reproductive rights and climate change.

All 140 seats are on Virginia's

ballot this November. Republicans hold thin majorities, with three seats in the House and just one in the Senate.

Steyer also announced in January that he's spending millions to call for President Donald Trump's impeachment.

Holiday Inn could house almost 200 Virginia Tech students

BLACKSBURG, Va. — An expected enrollment influx at Virginia Tech University means the college could set up students at a nearby Holiday Inn for alternative housing.

The Roanoke Times reports the university announced last week it had made the first steps toward an agreement to lease the Holiday Inn Express hotel for the academic year.

The university initially anticipated about 6,600 freshmen in the fall. Now it figures 1,000 more students may attend.

So they've added about 500 beds on campus and are looking for 500 more off campus. That includes the Holiday Inn, where about 195 students would live dorm-style. These freshmen probably won't get room service — the university says it'll organize the hotel like any other residence hall, with resident assistants and first-year programming.

A year later, little impact after denying Trump aide dinner

LEXINGTON, Va. — Tourism in a small Virginia town has suffered little in the year since The Red Hen restaurant famously refused to serve President Donald Trump's spokeswoman, Sarah Huckabee Sanders.

The Roanoke Times reports that Lexington's meals and lodging tax

revenues are steady, and a survey commissioned by a regional tourism office found the incident didn't dissuade people visiting the area.

The small restaurant's co-owner has said she asked Sanders to leave the restaurant in June 2018 at the request of gay employees who objected to how Sanders defended Trump's desire to bar transgender people from the military.

That triggered debate about whether politics should play a role in how administration officials are treated in public.

Trump recently announced that Sanders will depart as White House press secretary later this month.

Petition seeks to remove statue of Revolutionary War hero

CHARLOTTESVILLE, Va. — The University of Virginia is considering a petition to remove a statue of a Revolutionary War hero because it depicts a potential attack on Native Americans.

The Daily Progress reports that the school's segregation commission is considering a petition to remove a statue of George Rogers Clark from campus that shows him and his soldiers possibly about to attack a group of Native Americans. The statue calls Clark the "Conqueror of the Northwest" and was given to the school in the 1920s.

Clark led a militia that fought the British and their Native American allies during the Revolutionary War. In 1779 he routed the British from Fort Sackville in the Battle of Vincennes in present-day Indiana. He is the brother of William Clark, who co-led the Lewis and Clark expedition.

From staff and wire reports

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Area tourism groups share in state grants

BRISTOL HERALD COURIER
RICHMOND, Va. — Eleven Southwest Virginia tourism entities were among 44 state-wide to share in nearly \$1 million in state matching grants. The \$956,000 in grant awards were announced Wednesday by Gov. Ralph Northam. The grants are part of the Virginia Tourism Corp. marketing leverage program, according to a written statement. The funds are designed to help local and regional tourism entities attract more visitors by lever-

aging local marketing dollars. This funding cycle, local partners will commit more than \$2.8 million to match the VTC grants, providing more than \$3.8 million in new marketing funds to increase visitation to Virginia. The grants will ultimately impact at least 182 other statewide tourism entities. “As we celebrate five decades of the iconic ‘Virginia is for Lovers’ slogan this year, I am thrilled to see such tremendous partnership, innovation, and growth within one

Grant recipients and awards

- » **Abingdon Convention and Visitors Bureau** \$5,000
- » **Barter Theatre** \$5,000
- » **Birthplace of Country Music** \$50,000
- » **Buchanan County Tourism** \$4,790
- » **Discover Bristol** \$10,000
- » **Friends of Southwest Virginia** \$25,000
- » **Heart of Appalachia Tourism Authority** \$50,000
- » **Sessions Hotel** \$12,500
- » **Town of St. Paul** \$10,000
- » **The Crooked Road** \$50,000
- » **Wytheville Convention and Visitors Bureau** \$50,000

of our most important industries,” Northam said in the statement. “Tourism entities

throughout Virginia understand the value of strategic and innovative marketing initia-

tives in promoting what makes this Commonwealth a great place to live, work, and visit.” Local entities and their grant awards include the Birthplace of Country Music, The Crooked Road and Heart of Appalachian Tourism Authority, which will receive \$50,000 each, and the Sessions Hotel, which is to receive \$12,500. A minimum of three Virginia entities must partner financially to apply for a grant. Partners may consist of Virginia cities, towns, counties, convention and visitors bureaus, chambers

of commerce, other local or regional destination marketing organizations, private businesses, museums, attractions, cultural events and other tourism-related businesses. In total, VTC awards approximately \$1.7 million annually — matched by partner dollars by an average of 3-to-1. The next round of VTC Marketing Leverage Program grants will open on Sept. 10, with a Dec. 17, 2019, deadline. Localities interested in applying may visit www.vatc.org for more information.

Kingsport Sullivan drug trafficking investigation results in two arrests

BRISTOL HERALD COURIER
 Two women are facing drug-related charges in Sullivan County after authorities investigated alleged drug trafficking in Kingsport. Brittany Thompson, 31, of Mount Carmel, and Sandra Vermillion, 45, of Church Hill, were arrested Monday after authorities searched a room at the Travel Inn on Lynn Garden Drive, according to a news release from the Sullivan County Sheriff's Office. Law enforcement had received information about alleged drug trafficking and went to the hotel at 7 p.m. Monday, where they came into contact with Thompson and Vermillion. Detectives saw drug paraphernalia in plain view and obtained consent to search the room, the Sheriff's Office said. Officials then found a 9 mm semi-automatic handgun, with one round in the chamber and a loaded magazine, about 3 ounces of methamphetamine, several syringes, multiple baggies, digital scales, rolling papers and a glass pipe, according to the release. Police charged Thompson and Vermillion with manufacturing, delivering, selling or possessing methamphetamine, possession of drug paraphernalia and possession of a firearm during the commission of a dangerous felony. Both women are in custody at the Sullivan County Jail. Thompson's bond was set at \$10,000 and Vermillion's bond at \$7,500, the release stated. The arrests were part of an ongoing methamphetamine investigation being conducted by the Sullivan County Sheriff's Office vice and narcotics unit.

Briefly

Sick and dying workers demand help after cleaning coal ash

KINGSTON, Tenn. — A backlash is growing from the Tennessee Valley Authority's handling of the nation's largest coal ash spill a decade ago. Workers said they were prohibited from wearing dust masks while cleaning up the ash and now suffer from cancers and lung diseases. The TVA contractor Jacobs Engineering denied their claims, saying the cleanup posed no health hazard. A Knoxville jury sided with the workers, deciding last year that Jacobs had breached its duty to keep them safe. But to get any money, the workers still have to prove their exposure to the coal ash made them sick. The public utility maintains that its contractor alone was responsible for any issues, but it's the reputation of the TVA that's at stake.

From wire reports

ANOTHER BRICK IN THE HALL



DAVID CRIGGER/BHC

Jody Brown, owner of JB Masonry, works on the steps at Viking Hall in Bristol, Tennessee. Many of the bricks in the steps had become loose and needed to be repaired. Since the original bricks could not be matched, the old bricks are carefully being removed, cleaned and reused. One set of steps was completed earlier this year. View more photos of the repair work online at HeraldCourier.com.

Family of minor league baseball pitcher slain

BY TOM FOREMAN JR.
 The Associated Press

CHATHAM, Va. — The brother-in-law of a minor league baseball pitcher killed the athlete's wife, toddler son and mother-in-law before he was captured naked during a manhunt in a tiny southern Virginia community, authorities said Wednesday.

Matthew Thomas Bernard, an 18-year-old relative of the victims, was arrested after police warned of a dangerous gunman on the loose upon finding the bodies Tuesday morning at a home in Keeling.

Bernard's sister, one of the victims, was married to Blake Bivens, a 24-year-old pitcher for Alabama's Montgomery Biscuits, a Double-A affiliate of the Tampa Bay Rays.

News of the slayings had prompted the Biscuits to cancel their scheduled doubleheader Tuesday.

“All we can do is kind of put our arms around (Bivens) as an organization, him and his family, and do the best we can,” Rays manager Kevin Cash said Wednesday.

Investigators are still trying to determine a motive, Pittsylvania County Sheriff Michael Taylor said at a news conference Wednesday.

Taylor identified the dead as Bernard's mother, 62-year-old Joan Bernard; his sister, 25-year-old Emily Bivens; and his nephew, 14-month-old Cullen Bivens.

Cullen was the son of Emily and Blake Bivens. During an intense manhunt Tuesday morning involving up to 100 officers, schools were locked down and a tank and armored vehicle were brought in to Keeling, an unincorporated community near the North Carolina border.

Authorities said Bernard emerged naked and unarmed from the woods about four hours later, running past TV cameras to a church parking lot, where he was recorded trying to choke a church caretaker. An officer unleashed pepper spray and smacked Bernard with a baton before he was



CALEB AYERS/DANVILLE REGISTER & BEE VIA AP

Matthew Thomas Bernard puts his hands on Keeling Baptist Church groundskeeper Loyd Gaudin as a state police officer attempts to take him into custody on Tuesday in Keeling, Virginia. The wife, toddler son and mother-in-law of minor league baseball player Blake Bivens have been killed. Bernard, Bivens' brother-in-law, has been charged with first-degree murder.

captured at a barricade with the help of a police dog, officials said.

Bernard banged his head against the cage in a police vehicle after being taken into custody and was taken to a hospital for treatment, Taylor said. He was released and was in jail Wednesday, where he was being kept on suicide watch, Taylor said.

A firearm was “involved in the incident,” according to Taylor, who declined to give details about how the victims died.

Police dogs were processing the crime scene Wednesday, the sheriff said.

Jackie Poe, the senior pastor of The River Church in Danville, told The Associated Press on Wednesday that Blake Bivens was a longtime member of the church, and that he and Emily would come to services during the baseball offseason.

“He's a fine young man,” Poe said. “Just a great example of a young man in baseball. And just a good Christian young man.”

“His wife was just a wonderful young lady. Whenever he was (in the) offseason, they would be in church.”

Poe said Bivens' parents are “just completely shocked and devastated and yet holding on to their faith and trusting in God.”

The church planned to hold a community prayer gathering Wednesday evening.

“That's what we do,” Poe said. “And that's the answer. There are no other answers for a tragedy like this.”

Bernard was held without bail and faces three counts of first-degree murder and use of a firearm during a felony, according to court documents. An initial court appearance was scheduled for Thursday morning. It wasn't immediately clear if he had an attorney who could comment.

Paperwork for determining Bernard's bail shows that he was attending community college and working at his parents' campground.