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Foundation turns a dark day in Pittsylvania County into a beacon of hope for children

Charles Wilborn

Nov 22, 2023

The founders of a foundation to turn a dark moment — a triple slaying that rocked Pittsylvania County in 2019 — into brighter days for children recently endured new tragedies of their own.

First, there was a house fire in October.

A few weeks ago, an automobile crash.

But Riley Jo and Blake Bivens continue looking beyond the mounting negatives.

They are on an unwavering mission to flip a nightmarish morning into a better future for youngsters.



Emily, Cullen and Blake Bivens show a moment on a ballfield. Emily and Cullen were killed in 2019.

Contributed

That situation unfolded in August 2019 when Emily Bivens, 24; her 14-month-old son, Cullen Bivens; and her mother, Joan Bernard, 62; were found slain. Matthew Thomas Bernard, 18 at the time, was charged in the deaths of his mother, sister and nephew. Bernard has yet to be found competent for trial.

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It was that day that Blake lost his wife, son and mother-in-law.

Yet, that tragedy is what brought Blake and Riley Jo together.

First it was friendship.

Then they got married.

It began about seven months after the tragedy when Riley Jo — from New Hampshire — reached out to Blake seemingly out of the blue.

She had just finished a previous semester studying author C.S. Lewis and had read “A Grief Observed.”

She felt compelled to mail Blake a copy of that book.

“We kind of just became friends,” Riley Jo told the Register & Bee in an interview last week.



Blake and Riley Jo Bivens, while enduring recent tragedies, are growing the Emily Marie Bivens Memorial Foundation to honor the memory of Blake's first wife.

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By August 2021, they were married.

“I found it really sad,” Riley Jo said as she learned more about Emily, “that her name was just constantly associated with the tragedy.”

By all accounts, Emily seemed like a joyous person. But her name was etched in history with a harrowing tale.

She wanted to change that. So, she first approached Blake.

“I really think we just need to do something to kind of reclaim her name for her,” Riley Jo said.

Emily had a passion for children and music.

So the idea for a music scholarship just started to blossom in the form of the Emily Marie Bivens Memorial Foundation.

“This foundation really encompasses her two greatest loves of her life,” Riley Jo said. “Even though she is no longer here, her gifts are quite literally still giving.”

Blake was excited and grateful when his new wife approached him about the idea to preserve the memory of Emily.

“I couldn’t think of a better or more appropriate and fitting way to honor Emily and Cullen,” Blake told the Register & Bee. “Riley Jo really brought to my attention how wrong it was that Emily’s name was associated with something so tragic and dark when the person and life she lived was so contrary to that.”

And the mission to “bring something healing and beautiful out of a terrible thing” started.

Riley Jo also approached Emily’s sister, Lindsay Harvey, about the idea. She wanted to make sure the family was OK with it and gain her approval.

“I was thrilled that Riley Jo wanted to work together to honor Emily,” Harvey said. “She had a heart for helping others, and the foundation is a perfect way to honor Emily and the causes she cared about.”



Wayne and Lindsay Harvey, from left, celebrate the launch of the Emily Marie Bivens Memorial Foundation with Riley Jo and and Blake Bivens at a launch event in the summer of 2022.

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Riley Jo herself was interested in music in school and desperately wanted to play the violin.

She remembers going to school one day and had the rented instrument taken from her.

Her parents couldn't make the payments.

Even though her dream pretty much ended there, it has a new life with the foundation.

How the foundation works

The scholarship program started last year with just one student, but now they have five and a "very lengthy" wait list.

“It’s overwhelming to see how many kids there are who really do want to play,” Riley Jo explained. The foundation writes a check to an instructor for a full year of lessons, currently just in piano. Cello and violin scholarships are in the works for next year.

They accept students between the ages of 8 and 18 in Danville and Pittsylvania County.

What’s especially unique about the scholarship is that it follows the student until they graduate. They guarantee money for lessons through the high school years.

“We don’t just fund them for that year,” Riley Jo said.

Also the students are mailed an electronic keyboard so they can practice at home.

It’s structured so the children are integrated into lessons with other students.



A scholarship student receives a piano lesson.

Contributed

“We quite literally are kind of providing the funding and allow the kids to flourish with the instructor,” Riley Jo said.

The foundation’s goal is to just be a financial path and “get out of the way.”

They receive yearly reports to make sure the students are keeping up and not missing classes, however.

The foundation carries Emily’s name, but another motivation was to memorialize Cullen, who lost his life before he could “explore his divine gifts and talents,” Riley Jo said.

“That way it’s kind of full circle as well,” she described, imagining that Emily would have taught her son how to play the piano. “We consider him a part of the foundation.”

The foundation is operated by members of the family, all working as volunteers and taking no money for their time.

“Riley Jo and Emily’s sister Lindsay are really responsible for propelling this dream into a reality,” Blake said.

Blake is the CEO and Riley Jo is the chief operating officer. Harvey is the chief financial officer and her husband, Wayne, is the chief technology officer since he has a master’s degree in computer science.



Emily Bivens plays the piano for a little Cullen. Both were killed in 2019.

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“We stay busy around here,” Riley Jo said, noting her full-time job in the world of politics.

How they moved on

When the tragedy unfolded, Blake was a pitcher for the Tampa Bay Rays, a Minor League Baseball team. He gave up on the sport in 2021 after a year of independent ball.

He lost his passion for the game and wasn't 100% sold on “doing what is necessary to be successful on the field,” he said.

“I felt my attention and priorities shifted greatly after the tragedy and I was no longer willing to sacrifice time with family at the altar of a game,” he told the newspaper.

While working full-time, he's also going to college via online classes now.

“My faith and knowing where my family is and that they are safe with their Lord and savior in heaven and no longer have to worry about the pain and sorrow of this world is what has provided me the ability to persevere,” he said, explaining how he has moved on from the tragic day in 2019.

Harvey said it was a difficult task to adjust from the loss, but — in addition to needing time to heal — the foundation has helped.

It's allowed the family to “reframe our loss into something positive,” Harvey said.

“By carrying on Emily's legacy we are able to reach those in our community that she had a heart for,” she related. “Being a part of this and seeing the difference we can make in our community has provided a lot of comfort.”



A scholarship student practices on her electronic keyboard.

Contributed

How they deal with more tragedy

Blake and Riley Jo suffered their own tragedy in October when a fire destroyed a home they were renting.

Then about three weeks ago, Blake's car was deemed a total loss in a crash, but he's OK.

"So, we've had a lot going on," Riley Jo said via a video interview while she was visiting her sister. "So it's good to have family around you when you have a lot going on."

Ironically enough, Riley Jo said they think the fire started in a security system, explaining it was an electrical issue.

They had renter's insurance, but are still slowly working through the process for a claim. They must catalogue all of their personal possessions in what she said was a "very confusing, lengthy process."

But, they are doing OK, she maintained.

"Between the house fire and the car crash, I'm just thankful that we are all still standing," she said.

When asked what she was thankful for this holiday week — amid the setbacks — Riley Jo stayed upbeat.

"I'm just grateful to have our health and each other," she explained. "But the most precious things in your life are the people that you love and the things you do, not the things you accumulate."

Those can disappear in the blink of an eye.

She knows that all too well.

"The people you love and the things you do are truly the things that are lasting and irreplaceable," she said.

What's next for the foundation

With the foundation somewhat flying under the radar, Riley Jo is trying to spread the word, even to people who didn't know Emily or the Bivens family.

The goal is just to get the name and mission to the community and find children who can benefit from a musical scholarship.

The main focus is to grow the donor base.

"We really, really believe in what a music education can do to a child," Riley Jo said.

She cited statistics proving that children actively involved in music perform better in school and go to college.

An ultimate dream — perhaps 10 or 15 years down the road — would be to have an after-school program and a studio dedicated to the foundation.

No matter how the path changes, Emily's memory will forever be tied with it.

Emily simply loved being a mother, Blake said.

“The memories that stand out the most about Emily and Cullen is just remembering how happy they made each other and how content they were to simply be in each other's presence,” he explained. “Emily was made to be a mom and was never living out her true purpose more than in her final years with us.”

Sharing the bonds of motherhood also are some of the most fond memories for Harvey.

“I was pregnant with my youngest son when she was pregnant with Cullen,” she said. “Being able to experience that with her is something I will always cherish.”

Riley Jo believes along with music training, the foundation also is ministering to the children and will have a forever impact on the kids involved.

And it all goes back to Emily.

“We want her name to be associated with something positive that encompasses who she was and what she loved: children and the Lord,” Riley Jo said with tears forming in her eyes. “We really believe in what we're doing.”

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Want to donate?

To donate to the Emily Marie Bivens Memorial Foundation, visit www.facebook.com/EmilyMarieBivensMemorialFoundation or embmfoundation.org. Through Dec. 15, anyone who donates \$50 or more will receive a choice of a headband, hat or candle. The items are custom made and include the foundation's logo.

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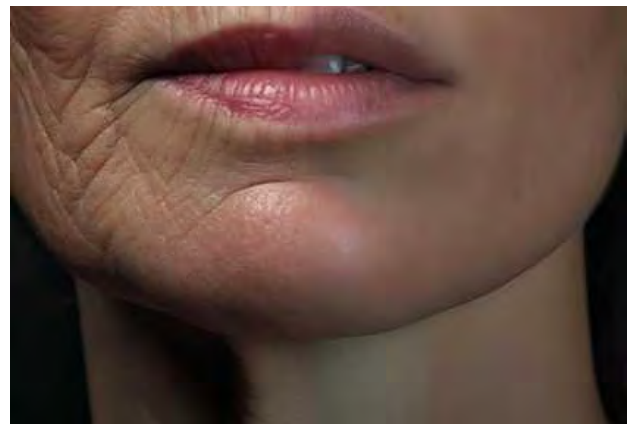
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By Charles Wilborn

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Blairs Fire and Rescue

Haunted house in Blairs more than a night of fright. 'We entertain you.'

Charles Wilborn

Oct 25, 2023

BLAIRS — It's pitch black entering the house.

The only way to move through the maze of turns is to feel around.

Knowing it's a haunted house doesn't help minimize the fright when there are unexpected diversions around every turn.

Boom. A hammer hits an old metal barrel. The jump was real, or at least it was for one Register & Bee reporter.

For the Blairs Fire and Rescue Haunted House, it's more than just a night of fright. It's the largest fundraiser of the year.

"It takes a different person to do this," Lance Fowler said.

Fowler is that person.



An actor rehearses his character Friday night ahead of the Blairs Fire and Rescue Haunted House. The night of fright is the largest yearly fundraiser for the department.

Charles Wilborn photos, Register & Bee

He's been a part of the haunted house all his life — 33 years — since his father Donnie Folwer used to be in charge.

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“It’s a lot of planning, a lot changing a lot of things you think are going to work,” he explained on Friday afternoon, a few hours before the crowds started lining up for the show.

For Fowler, it’s not just about a good scare — although that’s certainly top of the priority list — it’s more about entertainment.

The highly orchestrated tour is all based on timing, with each actor — some 50 of them — knowing precisely when to make the move.

Beyond the actors, there are about two dozen others involved in some way, from parking cars to taking money to selling T-shirts.

All are volunteers. While some are with the fire and rescue agencies, others aren’t. They come out to support the cause and raise money for the department.

“We rely on the community and their support to get us through this,” Fowler said. “Our community has been very good to us and they let us continue.”

Fowler didn’t have an exact figure on how many people had ventured through, but he said they come from everywhere for the 35-year tradition.

“We are the only haunted house around in Pittsylvania County and Danville,” he said before giving the Register & Bee a tour of what patrons can expect.

After paying, attendees go through a handheld metal detector to make sure there are no weapons. Depending on the line — and sometimes it’s quite long — there may be a little wait. There are concessions available offering food and drinks for pay.

For the colder nights, there’s hot chocolate to keep a person warm, provided fear isn’t enough.

The exact start of the all depends Mother Nature.

“It has to be dark in the woods,” Fowler said, pointing to an area behind the haunted house that plays an equal role in the experience.

When the daylight is gone, the show begins.

In groups of eight, first someone reads a list of rules. Beyond keeping it family friendly — no profanity, smoking or alcohol — folks aren’t allowed to touch or grab the monsters or props. Don’t worry, they won’t grab either.



Lance Fowler explains a portion of the Blairs Fire and Rescue Haunted House on Friday afternoon.

Charles Wilborn, Register & Bee

'It's creepy'

“The house is very dark,” Fowler explained. “It’s really creepy.”

Jumping ahead just a bit, he starts to talk — “as you come through” — but cuts the speech short to bang on a barrel.

That gets the first scare out of the way.

Ben Dalton, a firefighter and paramedic, makes the next appearance.

“They’ll come in here,” he explained, although where he was standing at the moment was a mystery because of the darkness. “It’s Captain Spaulding’s Museum of Monsters and Madmen.”

What Dalton won’t say to the average attendee is that people are hiding everywhere. There’s also “super loud” Halloween music playing.

“They’ll come in here and they will hang out for a little speech,” he said.

“Alright, we’re coming in, we’re coming in, everybody against the wall, against the wall,” Dalton said with his acting voice on, just as he would during a show.

Fowler’s job is to position everyone where he wants them, all without anyone realizing it’s happening.

“I do my spiel,” Fowler said. “I’m big and I look big and I’m pushing everybody against the wall.”

His next line is the key to another unexpected turn.

“Now you’re going to die,” Fowler said as an air hammer emits a shuttering blast.

It happens just like clockwork.

“There’s a guy behind you, his face is right here over your shoulder,” Fowler explained, pointing to a drop-down door with a masked creature ready to yell.

“Everybody knows their place,” he said when asked how the show worked with so much precision.

While not “knocking” other haunted houses, Dalton said many are just fancy sets and people jumping out to go “boo.”

“We’ve got a lot of people here they take a lot of pride in it and they want to act and they want to entertain you for your money,” Dalton said.

In fact, Fowler puts an entertainer in each room.

So far, this is just the second room. There are seven left in the house.

Venturing on — each room is filled with smoke, only adding to the disorienting darkness — it seems like there are a lot of actors in the house. Actually, it’s the same people. They have the timing down so perfectly they rotate and bounce about without

anyone being the wiser.

But don't be fooled. If it looks like a wall, it's not. It's a door.

"In our house, what we do, we entertain you," Fowler said.

That involves yelling and screaming. A lot of yelling and screaming.

"We lose our voice in the first hour," he said, noting the remedy is cough drops and hot chocolate courtesy of the concession stand. Again, these are delivered right on cue when needed.

After winding through the house, that part of the show is over.

But the adventure isn't.



A volunteer checks on work Friday for the Blairs Fire and Rescue Haunted House.

Charles Wilborn, Register & Bee

Outside

“You’re just starting,” Fowler explained, escorting the Register & Bee outside to a waiting area for the next part.

Met with a guide, the bunch — still in groups of eight — will get a refresher on the rules, just in case anxiety from the house made someone forget.

“I’ve got people on each side of this way and they are like 7-foot tall anyway,” Fowler explained in a tongue-in-cheek way heading to a winding path.

In the daylight, it’s forbidding. When the tour happens at night, lasers emit a green glow-in-the-dark effect.

“It looks creepy,” Fowler said, “It looks like you’re walking, like you’re kind of scared to walk.”

Then a clown runs out with a crowbar. It’s only going to get even more creepy.

Up next, there’s a family with three women — ages 20 to 25 — who are contortionists, not exactly the kind of thing expected on a haunted trail.

That’s the point. Expect the unexpected.

Dalton, again contrasting the Blairs adventure with other haunting exhibits, said it’s something new each year.

“It’s always going to be a new show,” he explained on the walk. What they did last year is out the window.

They start the planning in July.

Fowler has a huge notebook — about 3 inches deep based on the width from his thumb to finger he used to describe it — he used to write down ideas.

On the trail other volunteers were out tending to the props. It’s not uncommon to make adjustments to improve for each new night.

The actors do the same thing, Fowler said. They are constantly changing and updating the skits as they see what works and what doesn't.

Back on outdoor trail, up next is Luke Fowler with his skit.

For this, the group sits on a pew in front of casket.

There's someone inside, of course, but not exactly the dearly departed.

Playing the role of "Creep-o," Luke Fowler gets into character to portray the owner of both a junkyard and funeral parlor.

Cue the entertainment.

When folks are focused on the show at hand, there's an air hammer ready for action just behind the pew.

"Every grown man here about jumps backward out of their seat," Lance Fowler said.

Resuming the walk on the trail, it's time to get into phobias.

The first one is spiders.

There's a tunnel — again, it's dark — filled with dangling creatures from the ceiling and ones with giant legs along the side.

Don't worry, these aren't real.



Wooden posts form a line for attendees to the Blairs Fire and Rescue Haunted House.

Charles Wilborn, Register & Bee

“You see nothing,” Fowler said. “You walk with your hands out.”

Emerging back into the woods, a strobe light disorients the group before heading to the next phobia. This time, it’s snakes.

These aren’t real either, but in the dark with Halloween approaching, it’s hard to tell.

Then, there’s another air hammer explosion, just for good measure.

It may appear that this is the end. But, wait, there’s more.

“You walk through here in the black dark,” Fowler said. “No lights.”

That’s when someone appears with a chainsaw — minus the chain for safety, of course — to add a few more thrills.

Another guy with a chainsaw then chases the group from behind.

They are ushered toward an old school bus and enter through the back.

“It’s super loud,” Fowler said, ducking his head to fit through what is normally the emergency exit.

With the help of lasers and smoke, only the top part of the bus is visible. It’s impossible to see what — or who — may be the seats.

In one is an actual train horn ready to go off.

Then people start popping up.

“They are jumping over the seats like kids on a school bus,” Fowler explained as more actors poke their head above the line.

“When everybody is off the bus, they are met with a chain saw,” he said.

But, this time it’s over, at least for the patrons.



And old school bus is a part of the Blairs Fire and Rescue Haunted House.

Actors keep going

For the actors, it's right back to work.

It's hard to say how long a tour lasts, Fowler said, because there are so many variables with each group.

"It never stops," he explained. Every four minutes another group ventures into the house.

When asked how the actors are able to function with all of the loud noise, Fowler said hearing isn't the problem.

"It's keeping your voice," he said, before he went into character who talks in a ultra fast and frantic tone.

And loud. He's very loud.

And he does it every four minutes.

"It's a good time," he said eliciting nods and smiles from other actors.

"The best part about it, they say, you got me," Fowler said of the frightful experiences from attendees. "That's the reward."

His main post is in the second room in the house. If he doesn't scare someone by then, he gets angry.

After all, scaring people is his job, at least for the haunted house.

"My job is to pick who I'm going to scare and go after it," he said.

The hardest part is teaching acting. For each individual, it all comes down to finding the right character.

Fowler's costume is pretty easy and he changes in a matter of minutes.

“One girl left to put her make up on,” he said.

He asked how long it would take.

“She said five hours,” Fowler said.

That’s when Dalton said it was “a labor of love” to go to such lengths for the department.

By the time the special daylight tour was done for the newspaper, actors had starting flowing in getting ready for the nighttime scare fest.

One girl was decked out in white. Another had on all black. Both had matching hatchets.

There was even a woman in a wedding outfit.

“When it comes 7 o’clock, it’s time to go,” Fowler said.

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One weekend left

- **WHEN:** The last two nights are Friday and Saturday. Free parking begins at 6 p.m. and the haunted house opens around 7 p.m. or when it becomes dark.
- **PRICE:** The cost is \$20 per person, and children under 6 are free.
- **WHERE:** The station is located at 7100 U.S. 29 in Blairs.



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While still uncovering its own treasures, Danville group getting National Tobacco-Textile Museum collection

Charles Wilborn

Sep 5, 2023

A treasure trove of yesteryear — an understatement of historic proportion — is growing larger in Danville.

The Danville Historical Society is in the midst of receiving the collection from the National Tobacco-Textile Museum, an entity first conceived in 1969.

It was once open on Lynn Street from about 1975 to 1990, according to previous coverage in the Danville Register & Bee. Since closing, the artifacts have been in storage with the exception of a few exhibits here and there and some special items on show at the Olde Dominion Agricultural Complex in Chatham.

George Myers, of American Tobacco, got the idea for a museum in 1969 and huddled with other tobacco barons of the era to donate thousands of artifacts from rare packages of cigarettes to baseball cards, Danville Historical Society Executive Director Robin Marcato said.

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It was only fitting that Danville would be home to the museum since tobacco and textiles built the early foundation of the city.

Those roughly 40,000 pieces — now scattered in about half-a-dozen storage spots around the area — are slowly finding a way to the Danville Historical Society's newish home on Cabell Street.

That location marks the the first permanent structure for the historical group formed in 1971.

The influx comes as they — Marcato along with two part-time staffers — are still sifting through the some 250,000 items already in the society’s collection.



Danville Historical Society Executive Director Robin Marcato, left, points to a photo in the John Tate collection held by Joe Scott, center, as Cody Foster looks on during an Aug. 23 tour. Scott and Foster are employees with the historical society.

Charles Wilborn, Register & Bee

Joe Scott and Cody Foster are the driving forces to organize and catalog all of those items spanning from tiny lighters to turn-of-the-century (20th) dresses.

“I found both of them and within five minutes of meeting them I offered them a job,” Marcato said.

Marcato went to Scott’s house to buy an old bottle from one of his many finds over the years. After a few minutes of looking around she knew he’d be perfect for the historical society.

“The love and care that he put into everything ... I just knew he would be great,” she said. “And Cody is just awesome.”

Both started in January 2022 with a task of going through boxes and boxes of donations through the years. Many items have no information attached, so a thorough research must commence.

“There was a lot of screaming in the first six months,” Marcato said with a laugh.

It would happen when an especially significant piece of the past was unearthed. One such yelling occurred with they found items belonging to Danville’s iconic Lady Astor, the first woman to hold office in British parliament.

Still young by generational standards — both are in their 30s — Foster and Scott are walking encyclopedias of Danville’s history.

“It may take a week or two, but we find the answers,” Scott said at a recent tour of the sprawling space.

Realistically, it’s going to take “years and years and years” to get a handle on what’s really in the society’s collection, Marcato explained.

“But it’s OK, this is the stories that Danville should tell,” she said. “This is what makes Danville great.”

One such collection is by John Tate, a photographer for the Danville Register & Bee back when the papers were a morning and evening edition. The pictures have been carefully placed in albums and put in special boxes designed for archival storage. They also have the original negatives.

Bound copies of The Chatterbox, a newspaper by George Washington High School students, rest on a shelf nearby. Opening to the Oct. 16, 1953, edition, the top story was the installation of new officers for the school.

Chatterbox archives go back to 1924.



A part of the brass gas lamp from the engineer car of the "Old 97" train sits in a case Aug. 23 at the Danville Historical Society. The artifact was picked up by J.W. Yarbough the day of the famous deadly train wreck — Sept. 27, 1903 — and eventually given to Edwin Booth.

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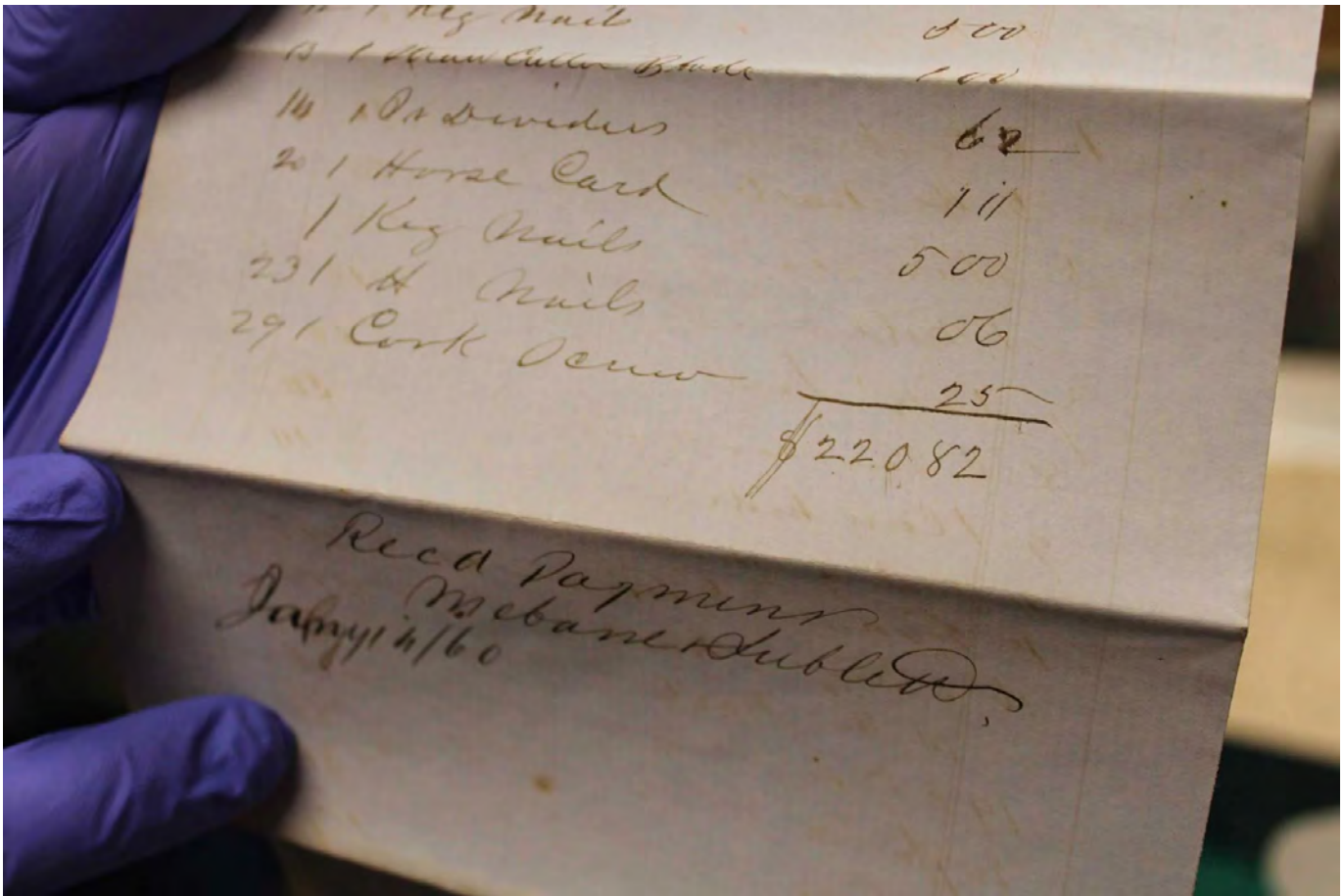
Other trinkets of time

On a late August tour, Foster displayed glass slides that would have been shown between silent movies as local advertisements such as J.W. Whitehead & Son in Chatham.

“This is one of my favorite things,” Foster said as he moved to another table.

“We have most of William Sutherlin’s business documents,” he explained.

Sutherlin’s mansion was the one-week home of Jefferson Davis, the president of the Confederate States of America, in 1865.



Cody Foster shows the itemized bill sheet for the mansion built by William Sutherlin. The cost in 1856 was \$22,082.

Charles Wilborn, Register & Bee

The document that excites Foster is the original 1859 build sheet for the mansion displaying line-by-line each item that was purchased for it.

The total cost was \$22,082.

Although the document is a testament to time, the history behind this particular piece of history is elusive. There's no documentation explaining how it came into possession of the Danville Historical Society.

"It could have been here since 1971, we just don't know," Marcato said, referencing the year the society was formed by Mary Cahill.

At the time, the mission was to save historic structures often doomed by urban sprawl. It grew into a holding spot for preservation.

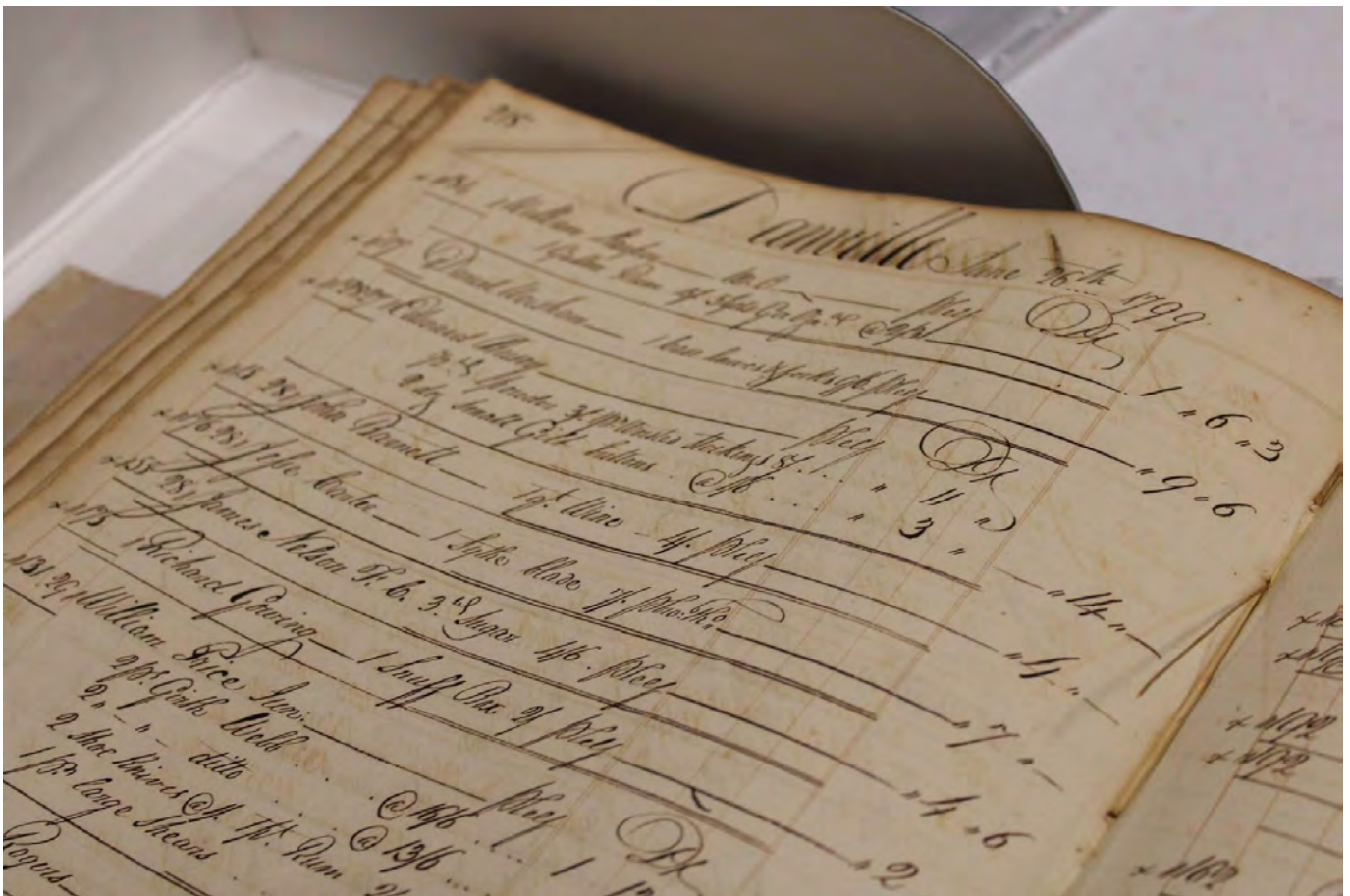
“There have been efforts to try to do this before, but it just never materialized,” Marcato said of inventorying everything that’s in the collection.

Foster then gingerly handled perhaps the oldest thing the society has: the Danville General Store ledger from 1798 to about 1804.

Gloves are used because bare hands dare not touch something that’s more than 200 years old.

The general store would have been located in the former Lou’s Antique Market space when Danville was just five years old.

Within the pages are every founding member of Danville and names that anyone who travels the city streets knows: the Cragheads, Pattons and Paxtons.



The Danville General Store ledger from 1798 to about 1804 is perhaps the oldest item in the Danville Historical Society's collection.

Charles Wilborn, Register & Bee

“It is complete,” Foster said. “It’s interesting to see what they would buy.”

Scott took note of the exquisite and consistent penmanship indicating it was filled out by the same person over the years.

As with most things they have, there’s no clear picture on how it came to the society, but Foster said it was saved sometime in the 1970s.

“I don’t think we even found it in a box,” Marcato said.

“It had a Leggett’s sticker on the front of the album, which we think is kind of odd,” Foster said. Leggett’s was a department store in the city at one time.

These historical gems were pulled out for a recent visit by the Register & Bee and aren’t necessarily something the public would be granted access to view. However, for a special guest they may take it out for a brief moment, but otherwise the delicate nature of the book prohibits too much handling. “It’s been used, abused and loved for centuries,” Foster said of the register. The days of show-and-tell for the society have morphed into a mission for preservation, especially as the items continue to age.

Sometimes they’ll get things that they simply can’t save, at least at the moment. When that happens, they document it as much as possible. But it won’t be thrown out.

Foster explained they will encapsulate it — basically meaning it’s wrapped up and preserved — until there is a suitable way to save it.

“If it’s moldy, it would go into a cold storage unit to kind of kill the active mold,” Foster explained.

It only took a few seconds for Marcato — amid laughter — to translate what that means.

They stick it in the freezer compartment of a small refrigerator.

“We have limited means here,” she said, not shy to admit funding is a struggle. “We do what we can.”

What they really need is a stand-up full freezer to properly care for some of the items as they come in.

“We’re working with very little to do a lot,” Marcato said.



Joe Scott, with the Danville Historical Society, explains the process to intake items from the National Tobacco-Textile Museum inside a so-called "CSI lab" tent.

Charles Wilborn, Register & Bee

Sometimes the treasures end up at the society in a spur-of-the-moment situation. As an example, a woman recently donated Civil War encyclopedias and happened to ask if they also wanted an “old dress” she had in her truck.

It was on its way to be tossed out, or more specifically heading to a second-hand charity thrift store.

It turned out to be made from Dan River Inc. fabric when the company was celebrating its centennial in 1969. Dan River gave the fabric to home economics classes at George Washington High School.

Students then produced the garments. In this case, the brown dress featured tobacco leaves and the dates 1869 and 1969.

The society previously had a sampling of the fabric. They even had paperwork of the centennial.

Now they have a finished product.

“Obviously the things people don’t think would be historically important, really are,” Scott said of this find.

Paul Gentry, the resident baseball historian for the society, showed rare baseball cards that are part of the tobacco-textile collection.

Printed from 1909 to 1911, the series came in packages of cigarettes from about 16 companies.

Ty Cobb’s — “Probably one of the greatest baseball players,” Gentry said — is one of the 730 or so cards in the collection. Cobb used to come to Danville to watch the Leafs play.

At one time, the baseball collection had more than 2,000 cards. It dwindled because the items likely weren’t stored in secured locations over the last three decades.

“We don’t have a value on it, because to us, it’s priceless,” Marcato said when asked how much money the collection could fetch today.

The collection is now stored off-site in a safe-deposit box.

“This will be the only museum of its kind,” she said. “Because most places that collect tobacco history are very specific about what they collect.”

The archive office where the historical society’s items are housed is a climate and humidity controlled space. The rest of the area is nothing more than an open warehouse with only a floor fan here or there to provide relief from a scorching summer day.

The society would like to renovate the whole area and open it up as an exhibition space for education.

“This is just a sampling of what you’re going to see here,” Marcato explained of a display showcasing some of the tobacco artifacts.

“We don’t just have Danville, we have everything,” she said.

And it’s still coming.

With about 20% of the collection in-hand, whenever anything new comes in, it heads to Joe Scott.

“Welcome to the tent,” he said, of what Marcato called the group’s “CSI lab.”

Scott showed some of the items that haven’t stood the test of time.

“These have suffered a lot of damage,” he said, pointing out disintegrating cigarette packs mounted on wooden trays. “These are 1880s, somewhere around that.”

Before coming to the tent they stop in the freezer — the thing Foster called the “cold storage unit” — to kill any insects that may be lurking.

There’s not a complete inventory of the artifacts of the tobacco-textile museum, but there are some photos and details compiled about 10 years ago.

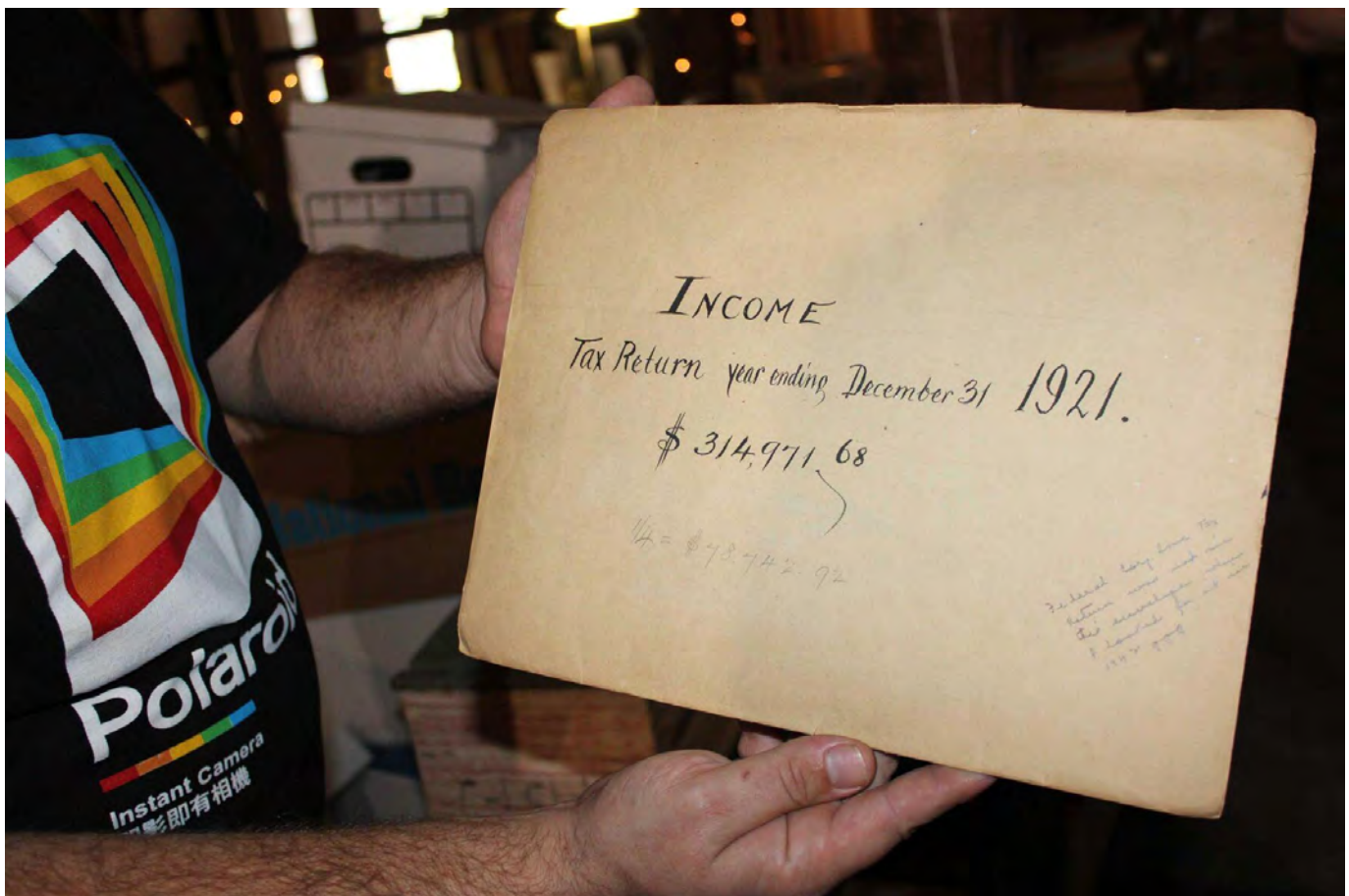
Scott documents everything that comes in and finds a spot for the new additions. He’s a bit of an expert when it comes to making things fit just right, ever in a tight space.

Just viewing the thousands of packages is a showcase to marketing efforts.

Before the health hazards of tobacco use were widely known, cigarette packaging played a major role in advertising.

“It’s mind-boggling,” Marcato said. “It’s amazing, just the advertisement and the mechanism on these things.”

The display showed one package advertising Adlai Stevenson for president. Another one was for “Real-Kill” a product that “really kills bugs fast.”



Cody Foster shows a financial document from Dan River Inc. in an Aug. 23 tour of the Danville Historical Society.

Charles Wilborn, Register & Bee

Textile

On the textile side of things, the society has nearly every piece of paperwork from Dan River, the company synonymous with Danville.

“You name it, and it’s in there,” Marcato said, motioning to dozens of boxes. In those cardboard containers are everything from pay stubs, accident reports and details on company picnics.

Right now, it doesn’t serve much good being in paper format. The overreaching goal is to convert it into a digital form so it can be available for research, especially from a genealogy perspective.

“We have every blueprint and schematic for every Dan River site in North America,” Foster explained, including one for a proposed project in 1923 that never got off the ground.

Scott carefully pulled out a blueprint that would have expanded Schoolfield Village, the area of Danville now seeing casino construction.

“For whatever reason, they didn’t do it,” Marcato said.

Scott easily picked out current landmarks on the oversized paper, pointing to Memorial Drive and Bishop Avenue.

A couple of hundred of homes were eyed there, along with a children’s playground.

“We haven’t even begun to go through it yet,” Marcato interjected of all of the textile items. “There’s thousands and thousands of pieces.”

Marcato recently stumbled upon a Dan River find outside of the tobacco-textile museum. Originally just wanting it as a table, Marcato asked for a metal cabinet when the police department was clearing out the old Dan River Inc. Executive Building to use as its new headquarters.

In fact, just about all of the shelves and furniture at the Danville Historical Society are salvaged from somewhere or another.

“All of the things we’ve come across here, it’s a lot to absorb everyday,” said Scott of his work.

But now having a staff means office hours are available for the public.

“So since that’s happened, it’s amazing the people that randomly drop by” and donate since they know they are open, Foster said. In fact, just that happened on a recent visit. It was a woman who had a gauge from Dan River that Foster spotted in a Facebook post.

After receiving the donation, Foster was obliged to take her on a very mini tour of showcased items in the archival room.

But sometimes they get calls for things that could be a better fit elsewhere. Recently, Marcato talked to someone from Chatham who wanted to donate a Maytag appliance.

While she would have loved to taken the item, it seemed more at home with a Pittsylvania County group. So, she made the connections and the delivery happened there.

“I’m a big believer in everybody wins,” she said.

Photos: Danville Historical Society continues to unearth history



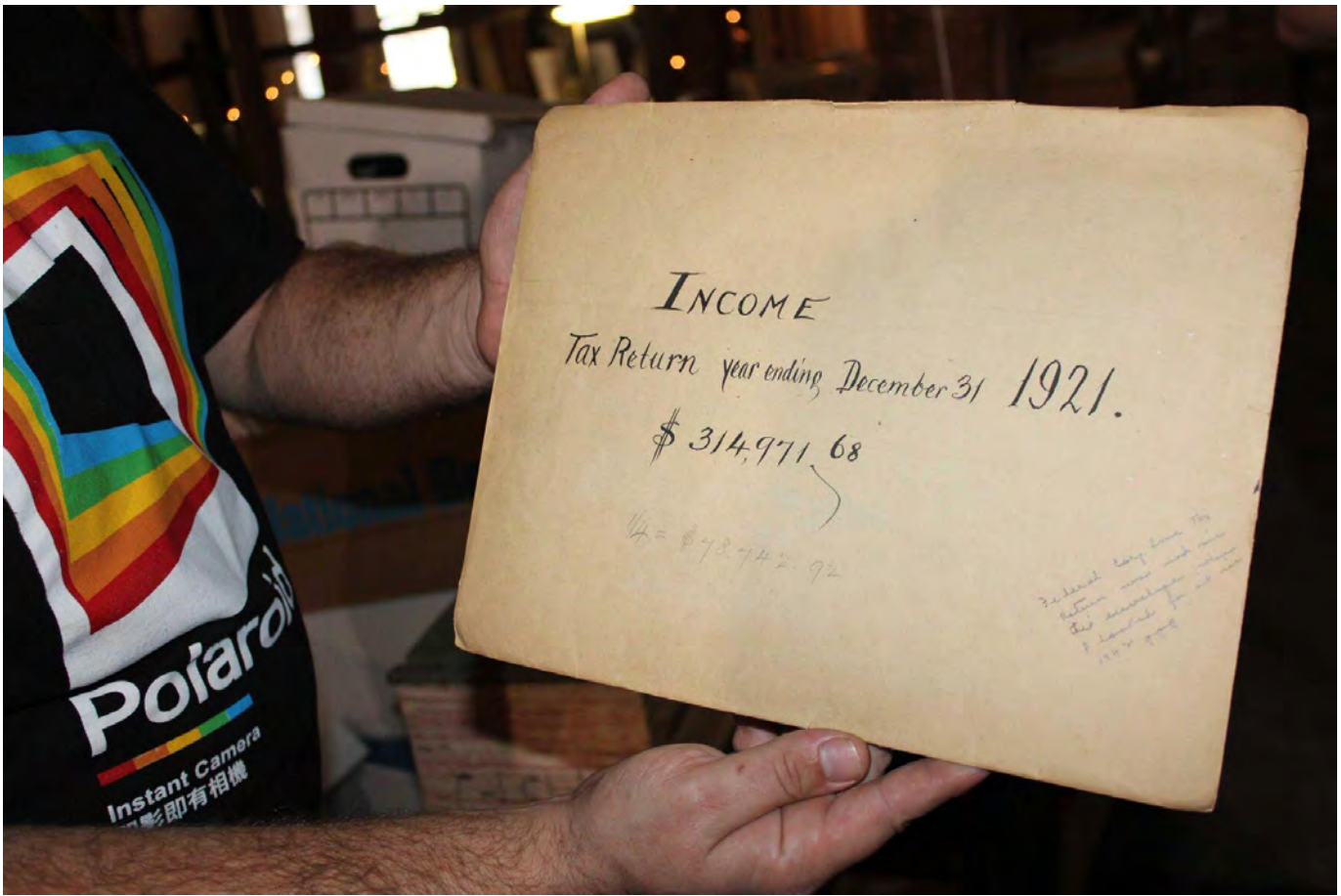
Danville Historical Society Executive Director Robin Marcato, left, points to a photo in the John Tate collection held by Joe Scott, center, as Cody Foster looks on during an Aug. 23 tour. Scott and Foster are employees with the historical society.

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Danville Historical Society Executive Director Robin Marcato points to packages of cigarettes that are part of the National Tobacco-Textile Museum's collection.

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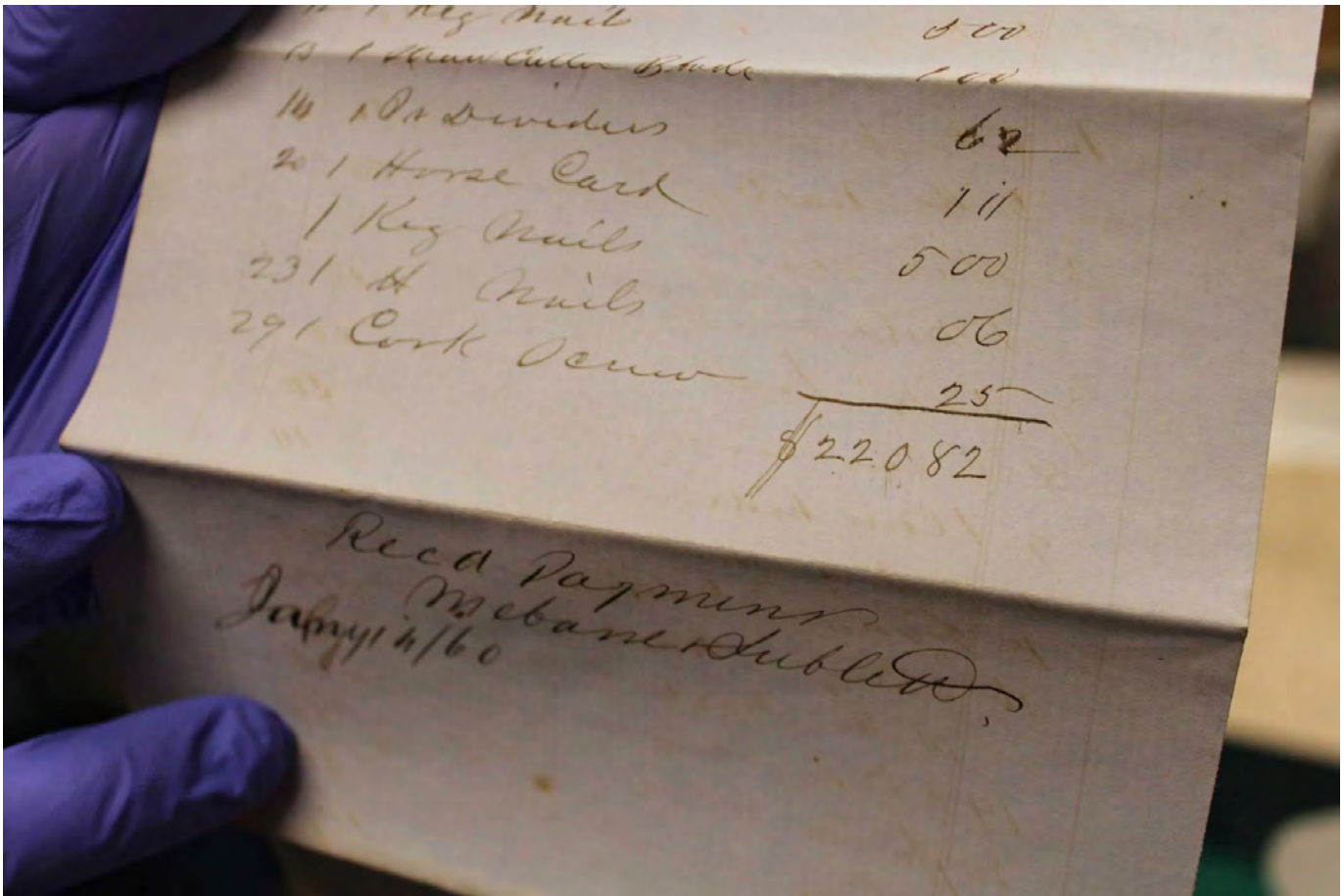
Cody Foster shows a financial document from Dan River Inc. in an Aug. 23 tour of the Danville Historical Society.

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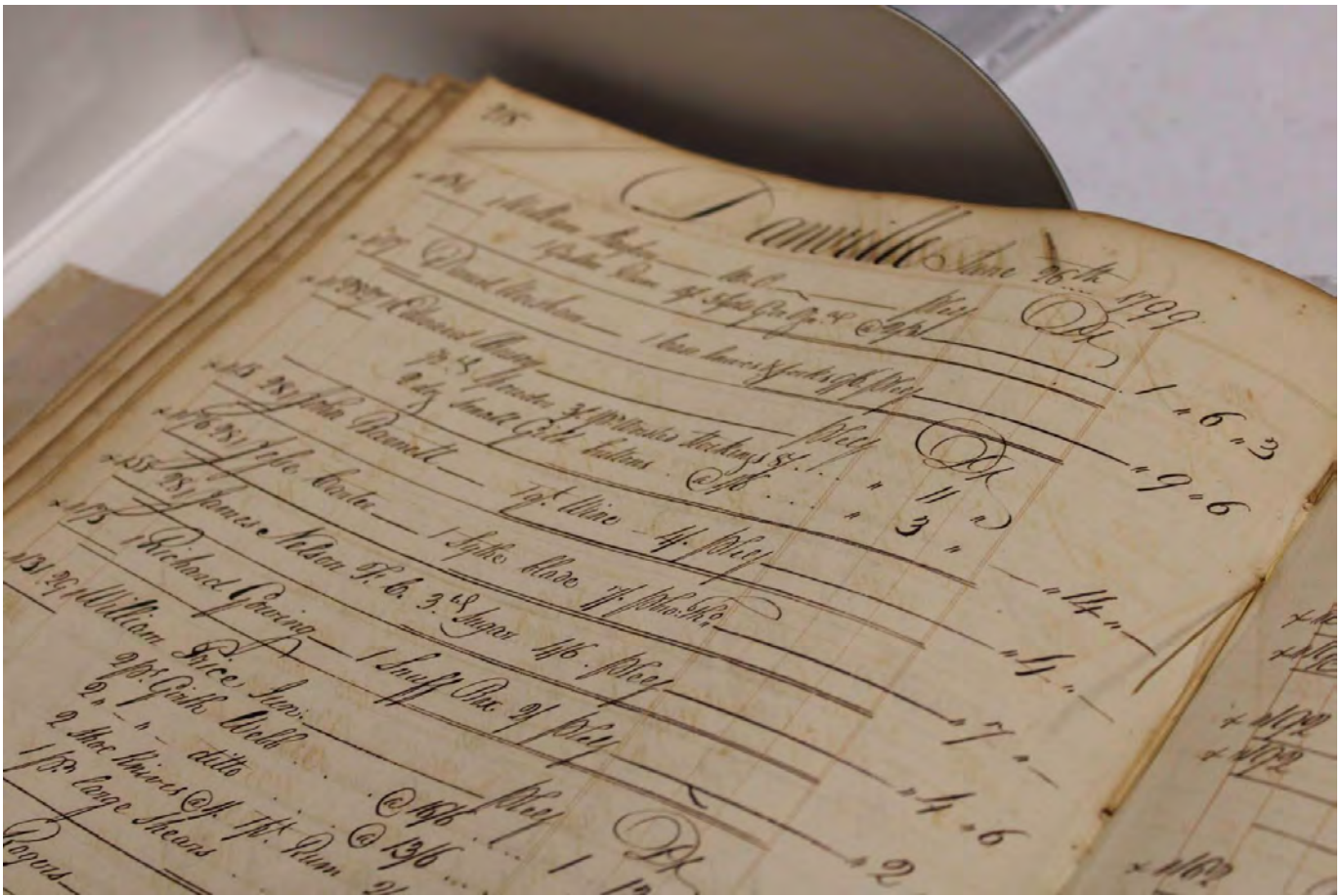
A part of the brass gas lamp from the engineer car of the "Old 97" train sits in a case Aug. 23 at the Danville Historical Society. The artifact was picked up by J.W. Yarbough the day of the famous deadly train wreck — Sept. 27, 1903 — and eventually given to Edwin Booth.

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Cody Foster shows the itemized bill sheet for the mansion built by William Sutherlin. The cost in 1856 was \$22,082.

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The Danville General Store ledger from 1798 to about 1804 is perhaps the oldest item in the Danville Historical Society's collection.

Charles Wilborn, Register & Bee



Joe Scott, with the Danville Historical Society, explains the process to intake items from the National Tobacco-Textile Museum inside a so-called "CSI lab" tent.

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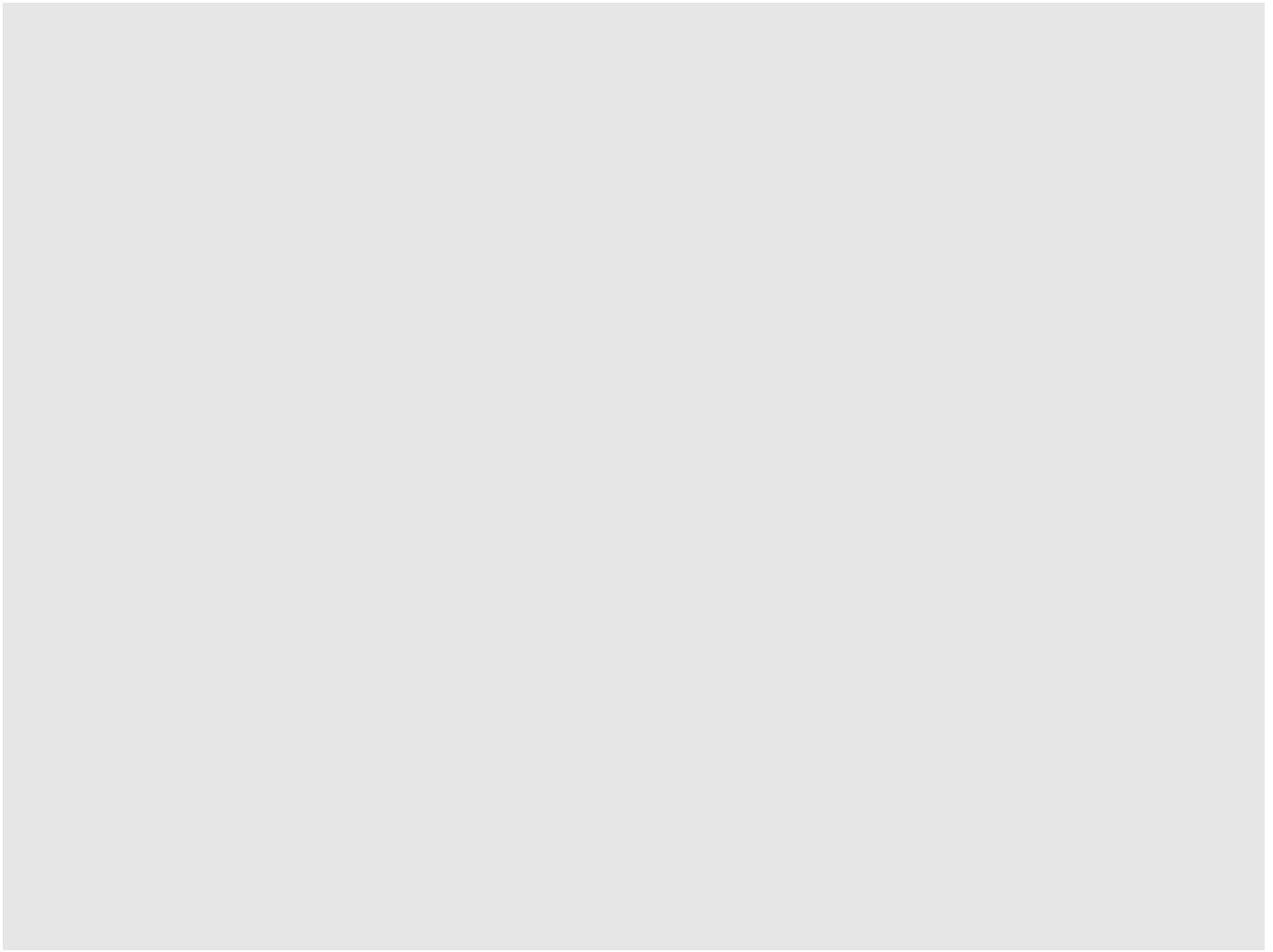


Cody Foster discusses an old loom on an Aug. 23 tour of the Danville Historical Society.

Charles Wilborn, Register & Bee

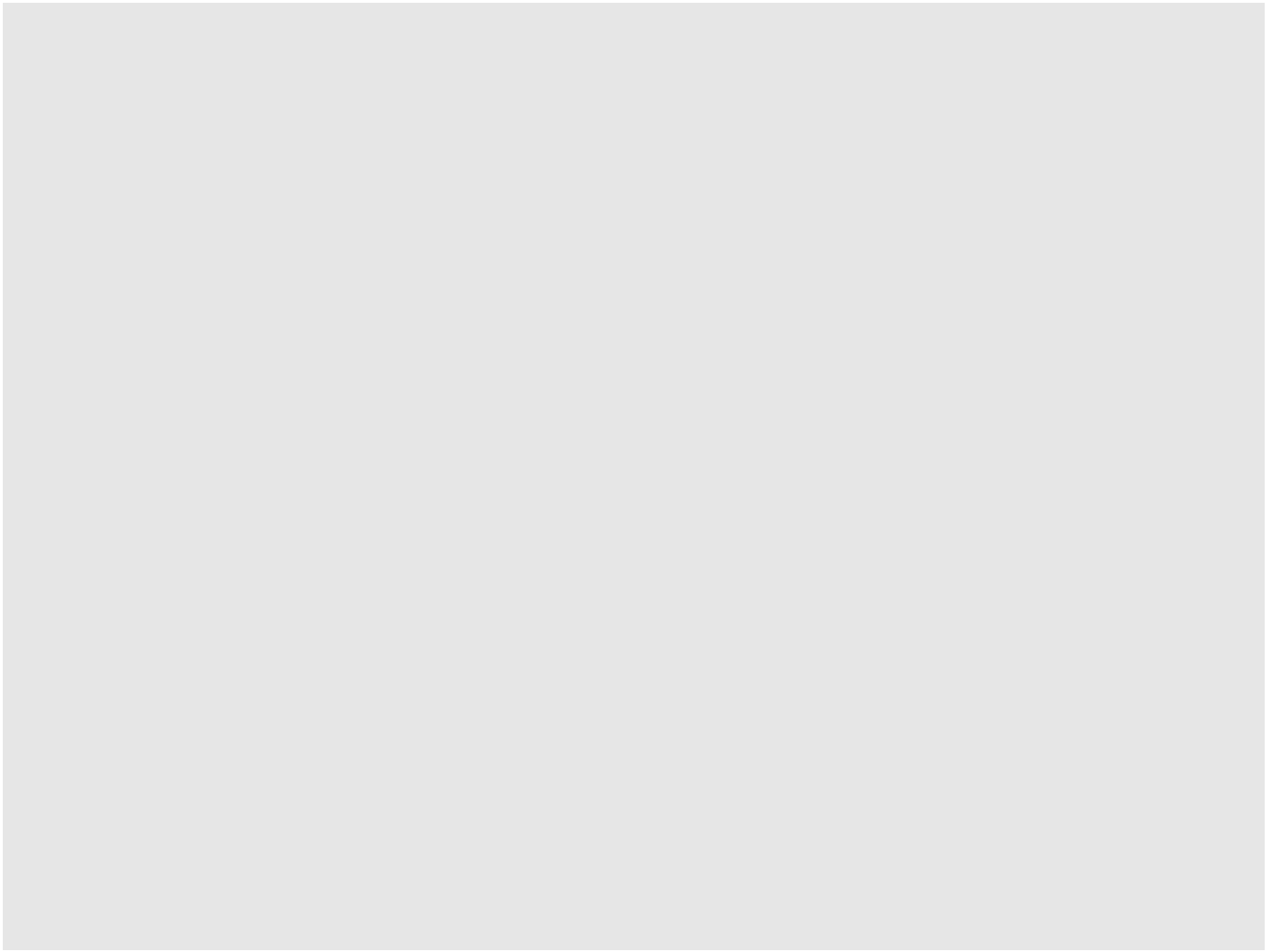


Lighters from the late 1800s to early 1900s are part of the National Tobacco-Textile Museum collection.
Charles Wilborn, Register & Bee



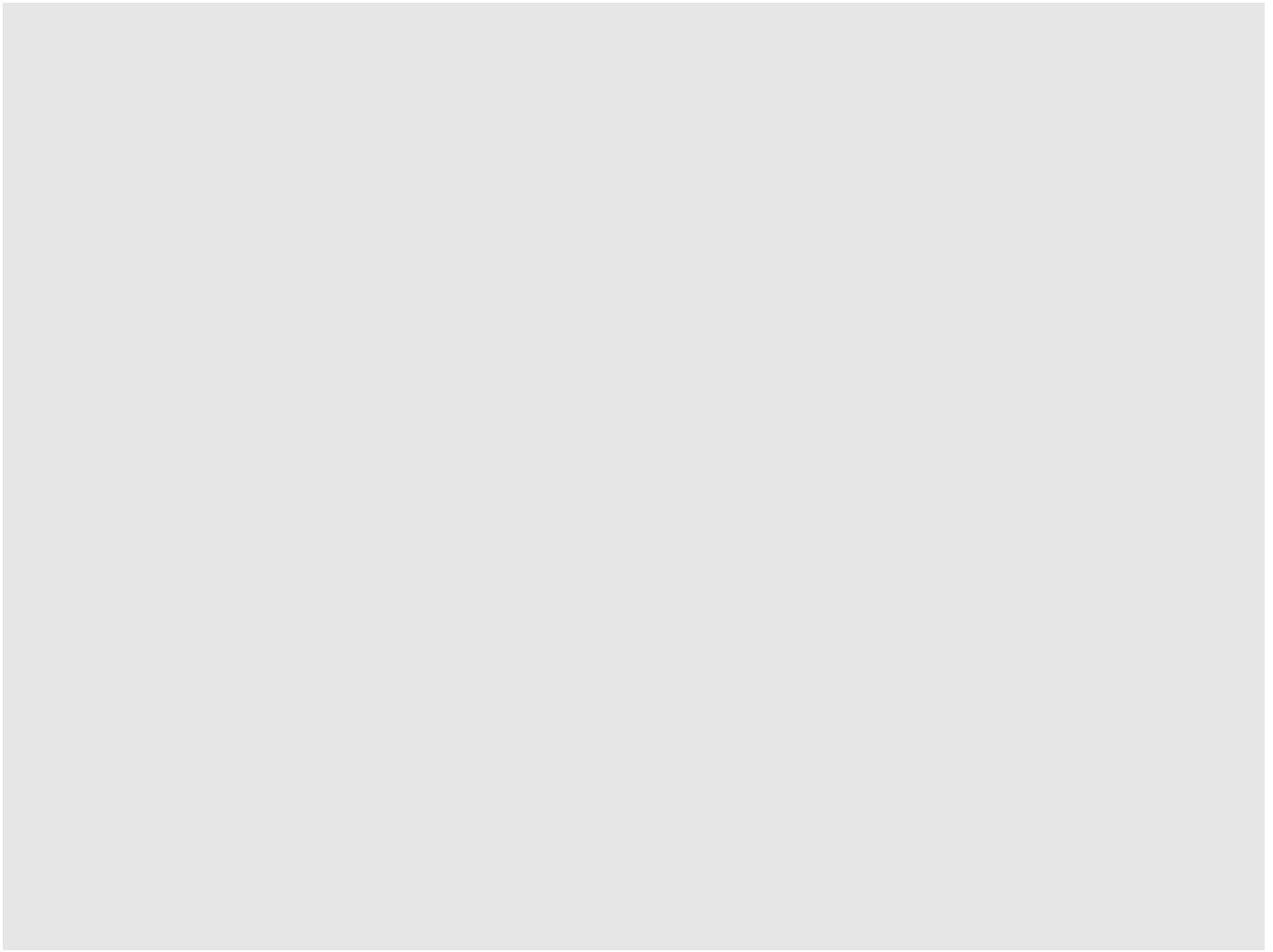
Joe Scott, with the Danville Historical Society, shows packages of cigarettes — Adam and Eve — that are part of the National Tobacco-Textile Museum collection.

Charles Wilborn, Register & Bee



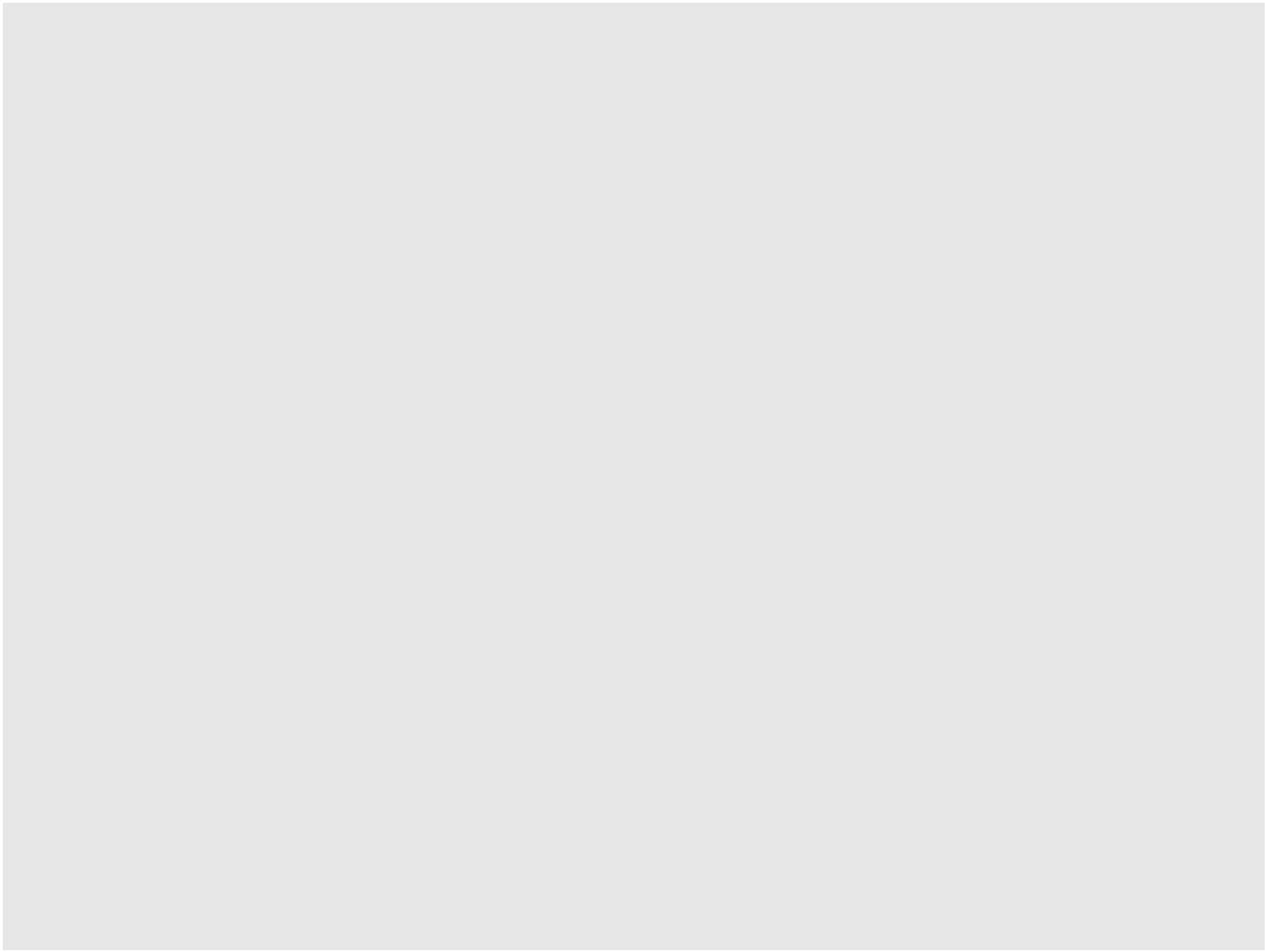
Framed photos of members of Schoolfield High School are some of the thousands of items in the collection for the Danville Historical Society.

Charles Wilborn, Register & Bee



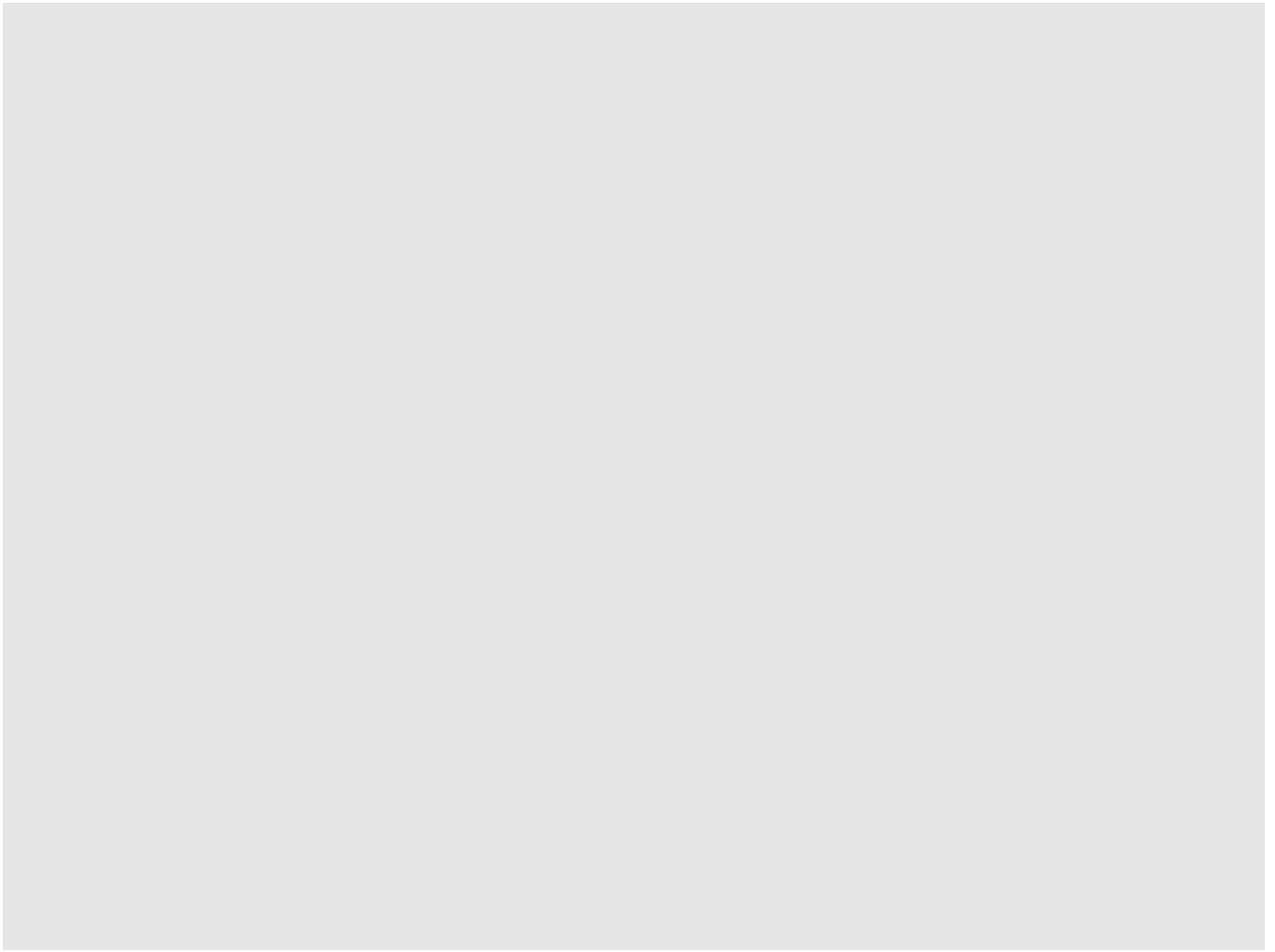
Cody Foster, center, reads an old item while Paul Gentry, right, and Joe Scott talk about its origins.

Charles Wilborn, Register & Bee



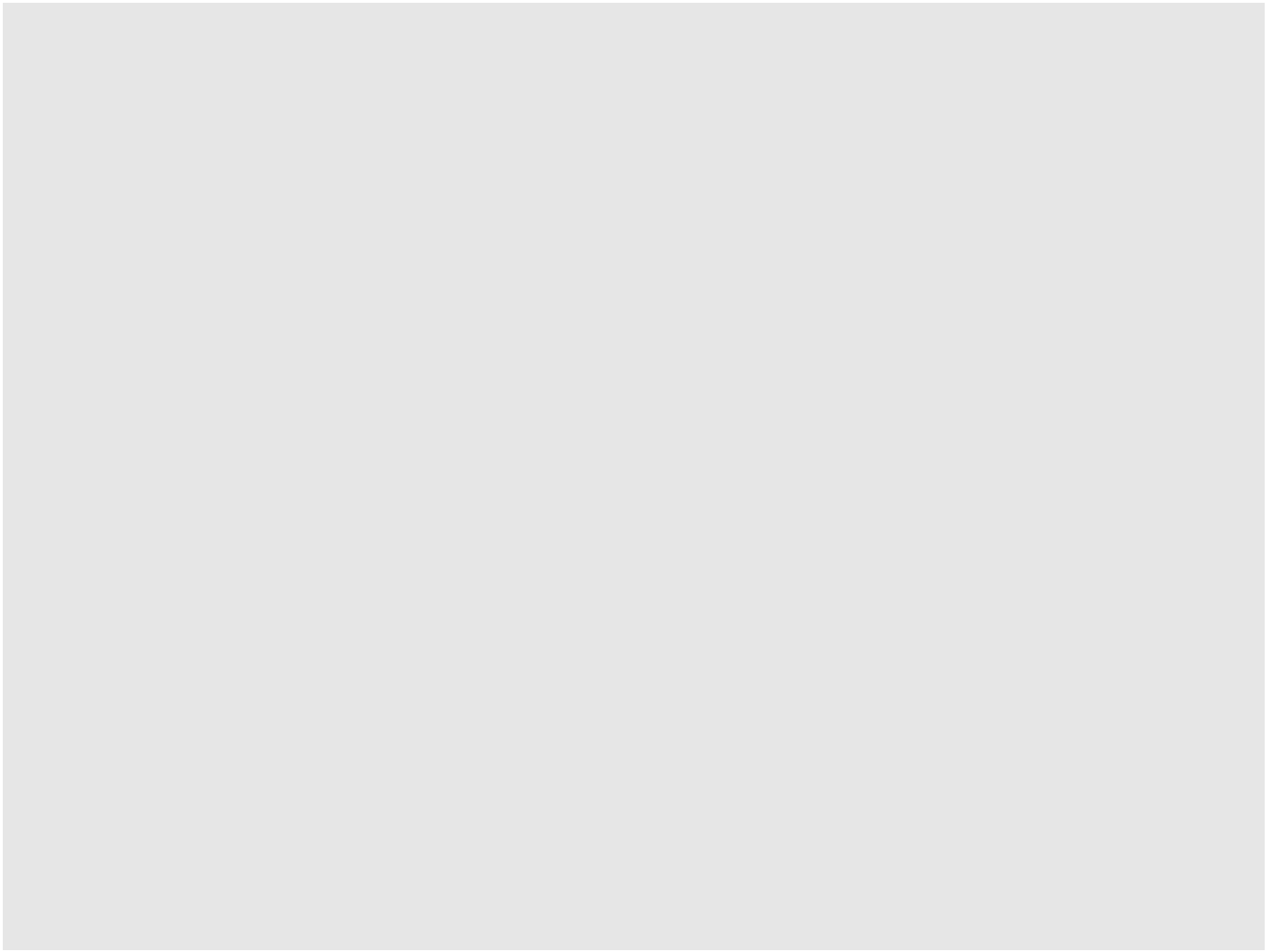
A makeshift display case shows a small portion of the artifacts from the National Tobacco-Textile Museum collection.

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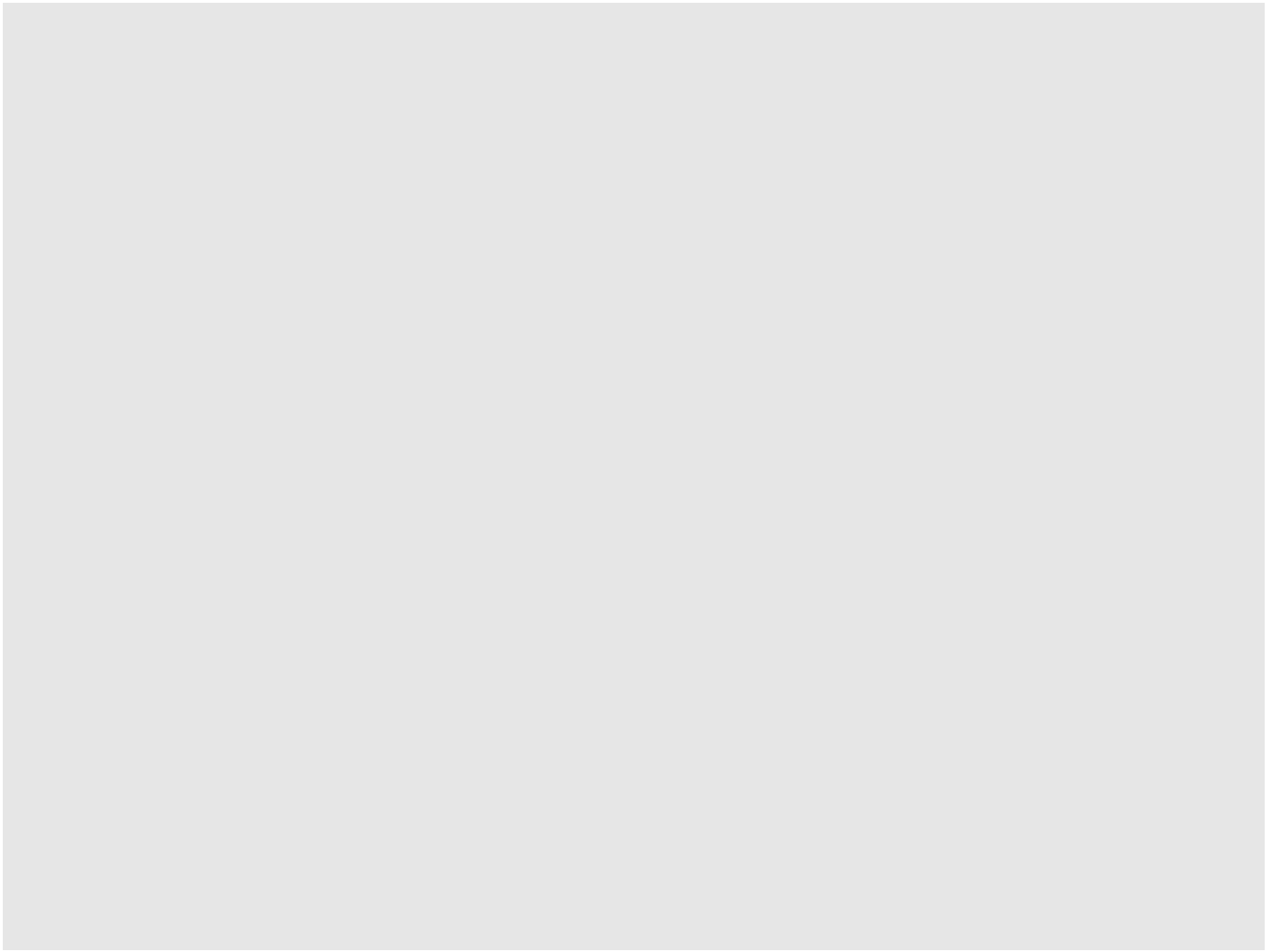
Cody Foster, of the Danville Historical Society, holds and old Danville bottle.

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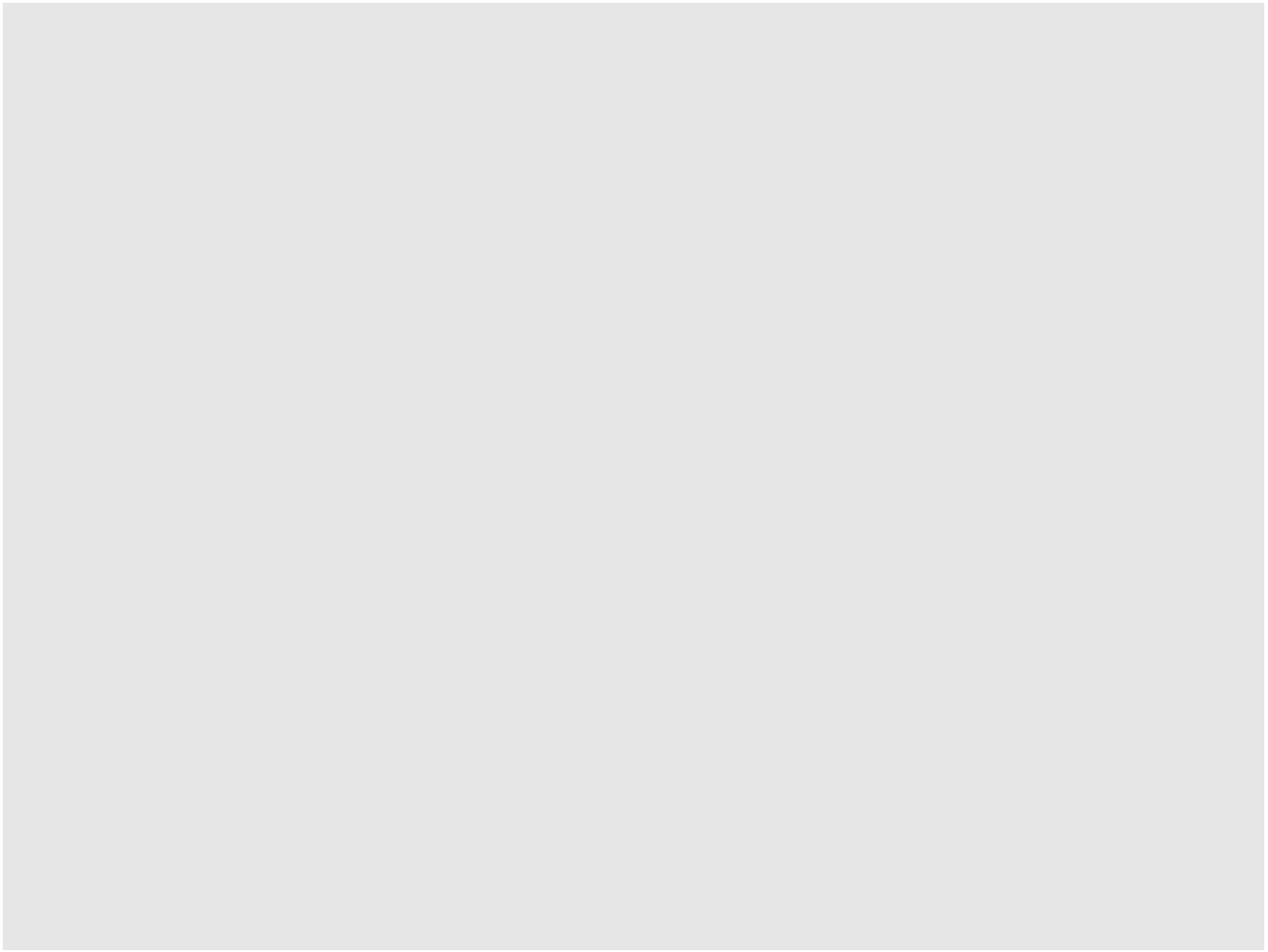
Cody Foster, of the Danville Historical Society, shows a casino-themed lighter.

Charles Wilborn, Register & Bee



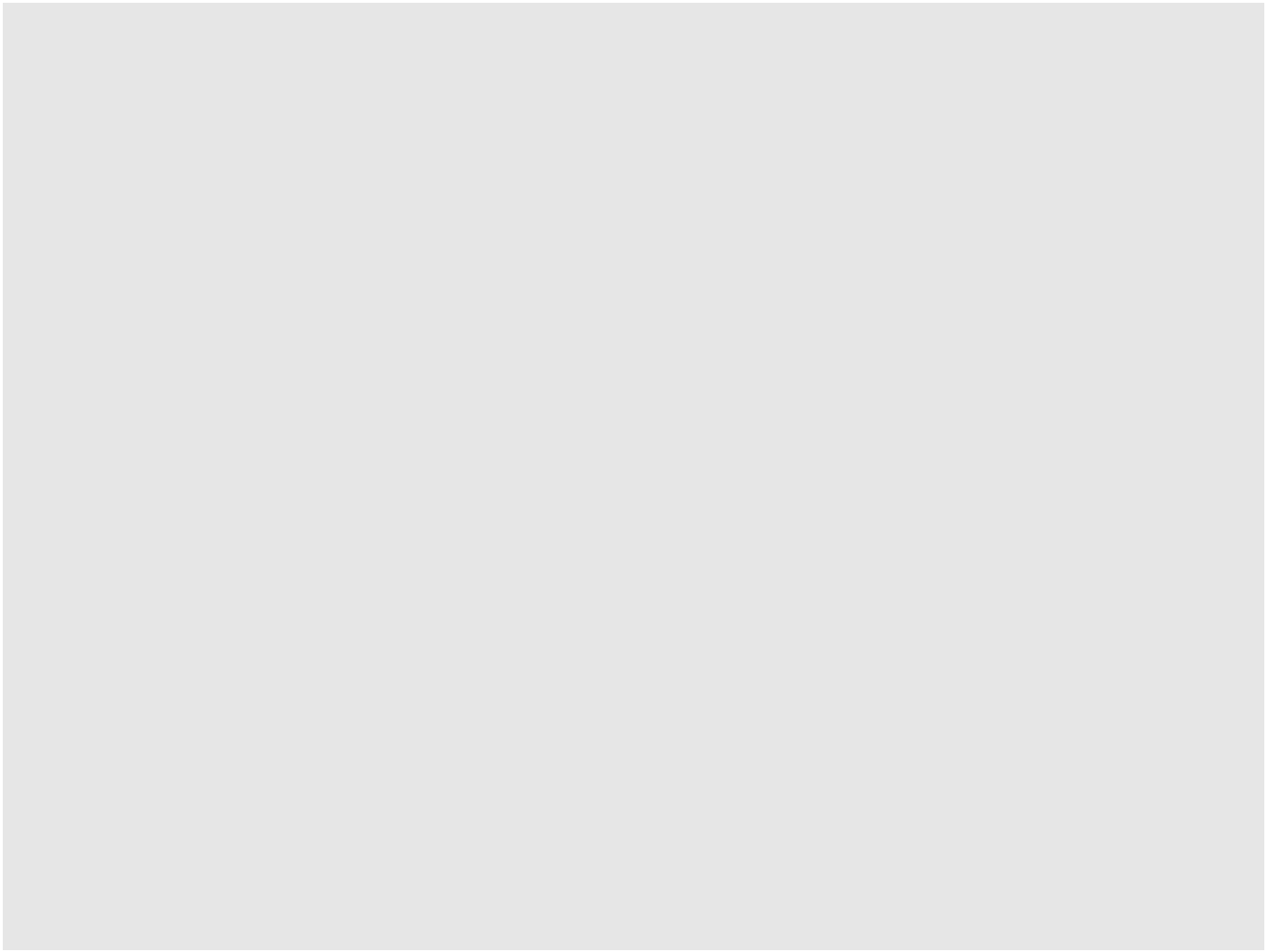
Paul Gentry, a volunteer with the Danville Historical Society, shows a rare baseball card that's part of the tobacco-textile collection.

Charles Wilborn, Register & Bee



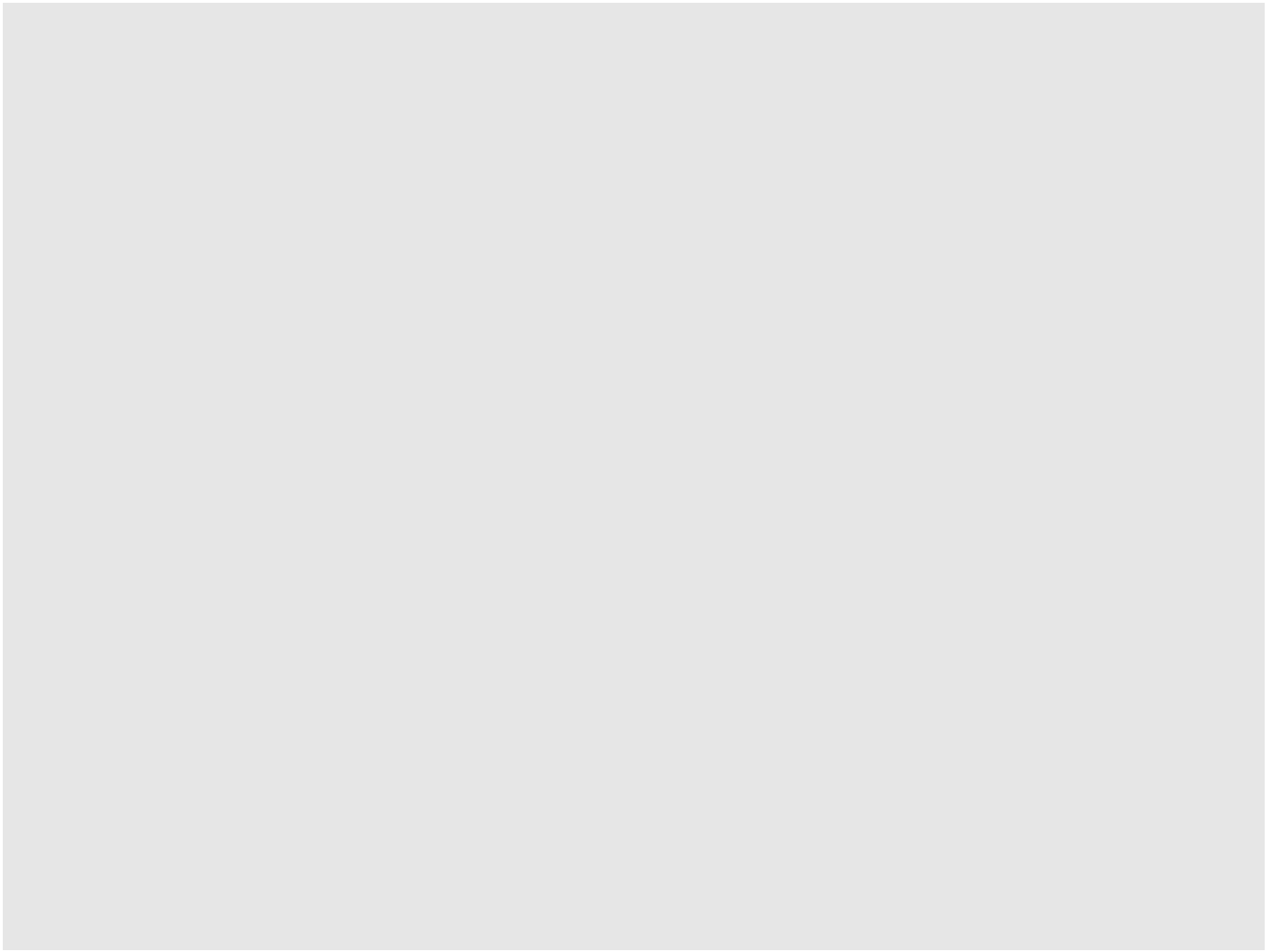
Joe Scott explains a blueprint of a proposed 1923 project that would have expanded Schoolfield Village, the area of Danville now seeing casino construction. The Danville Historical Society has every blueprint and schematic each Dan River Inc. site in North America.

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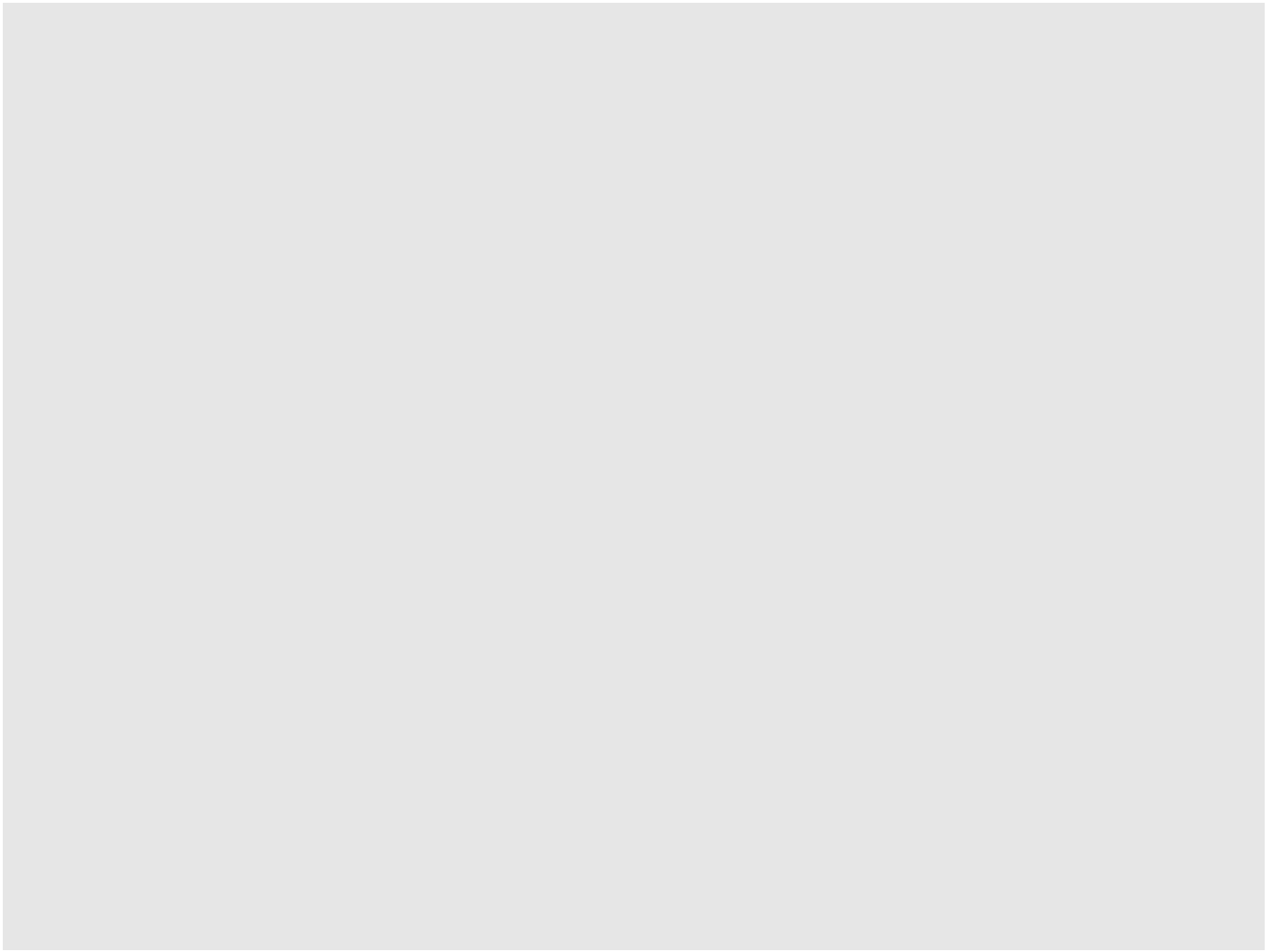
This dress was made from Dan River Inc. fabric when the company was celebrating its centennial in 1969. Dan River gave the fabric to home economics classes at George Washington High School. Students then produced the garments. In this case, the brown dress featured tobacco leaves and the dates 1869 and 1969.

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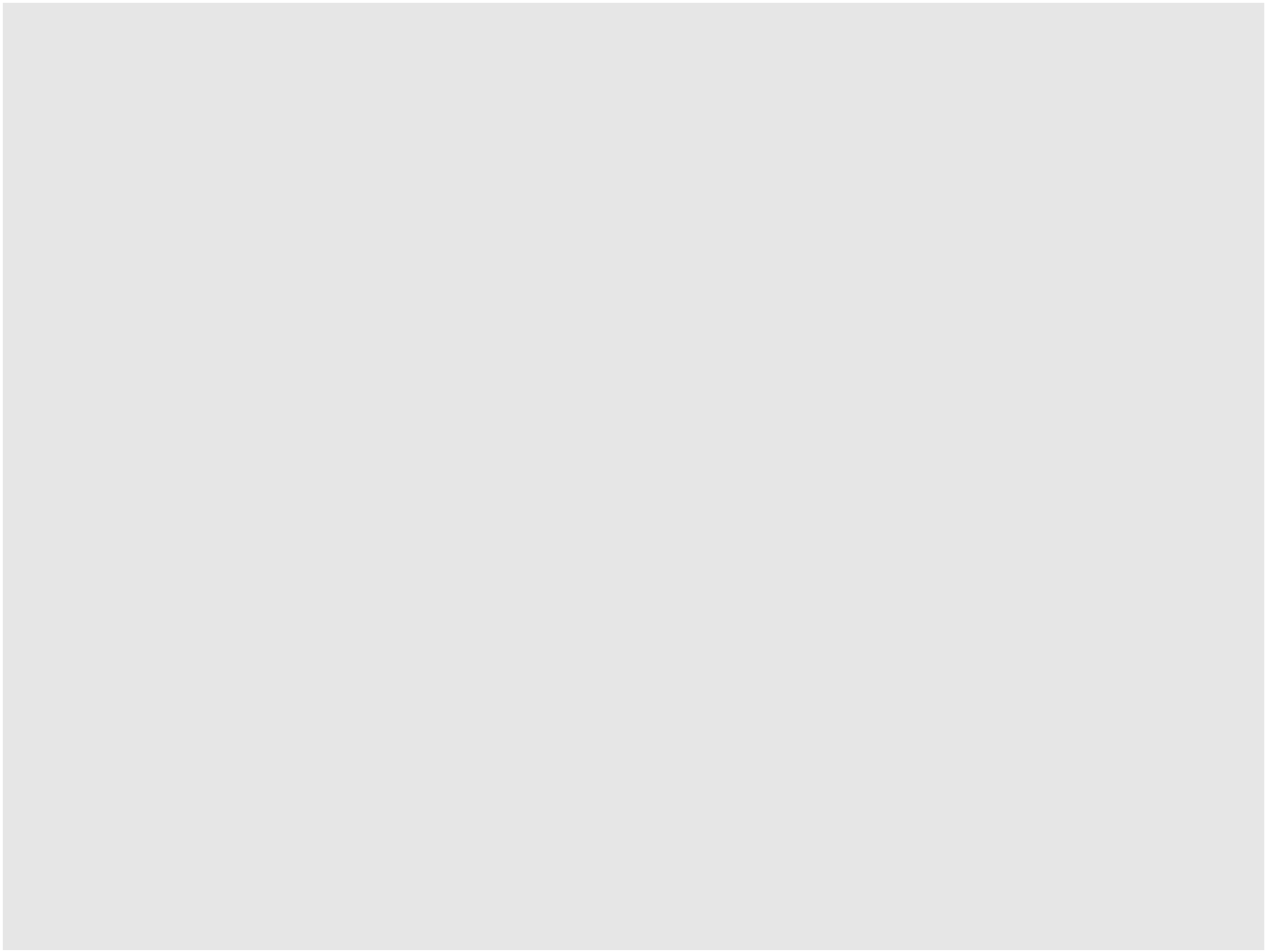
Joe Scott, with the Danville Historical Society, shows photos from the John Tate collection.

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A page from The Chatterbox — Oct. 16, 1953 — is displayed during a tour of the Danville Historical Society. The Chatterbox was George Washington High School's newspaper.

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Cody Foster, with the Danville Historical Society, handles glass slides that would have been showed between silent movies as local advertisements such as J.W. Whitehead & Son in Chatham.

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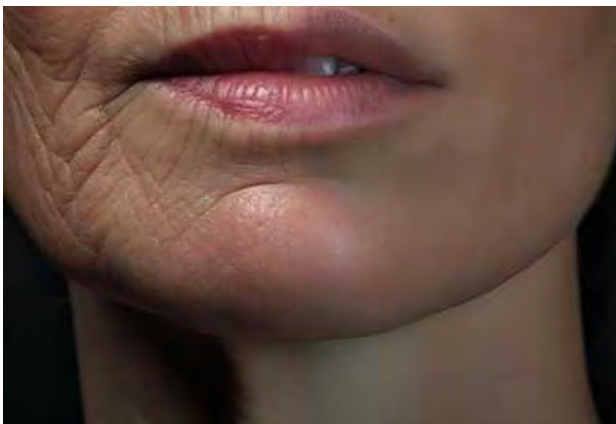
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