

You probably don't know about the Roanoke Black Cardinals. But baseball fans should.

The 1940s baseball team was part of Roanoke's version of the Negro Leagues. They were remembered at a recent Salem Red Sox game.

by **Ralph Berrier Jr.**

Cardinal News

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The scent of a cigar still reminds Ron Williams of his father.

Malcolm Williams earned the nickname “Red” because of his preference for a popular 5-cent, red-labeled cigar brand back when he played baseball in Roanoke in the 1940s. A generation later, even as a widower raising six kids in Northwest Roanoke after his playing days were through, Red Williams kept a cigar between his lips, though he mostly chewed them rather than smoked them.

“Every time I smell a cigar, I think of him,” Ron Williams said.

Memories of his dad came at him like a line drive on a recent June evening inside Salem Memorial Ballpark, home of the Salem Red Sox minor-league baseball team. Not because of the wafting aroma of tobacco, but because of a photo that was part of a modest display. There, in a fuzzy, enlarged photograph, Red Williams stared out from

the top row of a team picture of the Roanoke Cardinals, the ballclub for which he played as a power-hitting third baseman in the years just after World War II.

The Cardinals were more popularly known as the Roanoke Black Cardinals, because of the skin color of the ballplayers. They were part of Roanoke's version of the Negro Leagues, when Southern segregation meant that Black baseball players could not play against or with white teams, so they formed their own loosely aligned leagues and played other Black teams from the region.

All of those players are gone now.

“His moth-ridden Cardinals uniform used to be at the house,” Ron Williams recalled. He never got to see his father play baseball.

“He had finished playing for a while by the time I came along. He'd tell us about his escapades on the field.”

David Denham listened nearby as Williams talked about his father. Denham had set up the simple display on a table during a windy evening when the Salem Red Sox celebrated African American Heritage Night on June 16, just before the Juneteenth holiday. Denham, a white retired minister of the United Church of Christ, wore baggy jeans with rolled cuffs emblazoned with patches of old Negro League baseball teams that dominated during the pre-integration era before Jackie Robinson broke Major League Baseball's color line in 1947. His display consisted mainly of a picture of Robinson, a few Negro League replica jerseys and a book about former Roanoke baseball player Larry LeGrande, who played for the Kansas City Monarchs and other teams.

Denham buttonholed fans as he held down his posters in the swirling wind.

“What do you know about the Negro Leagues?” he asked.

He has made it his task to tell the stories of the Negro Leagues, the Roanoke Black Cardinals and players such as Larry LeGrande and Malcolm “Red” Williams.

“Most of Roanoke doesn’t know that the Black Cardinals existed,” Denham said.

Golden age of the Black Cardinals

During days of segregation, Black Roanokers loved baseball.

African American teams thrived in the early to mid-20th century, starting when the “Magic City” railroad boomtown of Roanoke rose from the creek-lined village of Big Lick and drew people by the thousands to form new communities from scratch.

The Norfolk & Western Railway offered better jobs for Black men than other industries — although opportunities were still limited during government-sanctioned segregation — and by the early 1900s, predominantly Black neighborhoods blossomed north of the railroad tracks that virtually divided the city in half. Before integration, Black Roanokers built a bustling business and entertainment district along Henry Street, considered the main drag of the Gainsboro neighborhood, a place that traced its roots back to the early 1800s.

In addition to businesses, doctor's offices, hotels and theaters, Gainsboro was home to parks and recreational venues. A few blocks north of Henry Street stood the Royal Gardens, an outdoor entertainment complex next to Washington Park that included tennis courts, a swimming pool and a large dance hall. Adjacent to the Royal Gardens was Springwood Park, a ballfield hugged with wooden bleachers where fans by the hundreds spent many Sunday afternoons watching baseball games. (The park was torn down in the 1960s. A football and soccer practice field is there now.)

Roanoke's local version of the Negro Leagues played out in Springwood Park and other fields that bubbled up on the city's north side. From the 1920s until about 1960, ballclubs included the Springwood Giants, the Norfolk & Western Stars, the Roanoke All-Stars, the Royal Giants, the West End Athletics, the Northeast Blue Sox, the Roanoke Dodgers and, perhaps the best team of all, the Roanoke Black Cardinals.

Very little has been written about the history of Roanoke's African American baseball teams that played during segregation. In 1997, on the 50th anniversary of Robinson's history-defining debut with the Brooklyn Dodgers, The Roanoke Times published a lengthy article that included interviews with a few surviving players who took the field from the 1920s to the 1950s, which included Henry Craighead and Alphonzo Holland. Nelson Harris, a Roanoke historian, minister and former mayor, included a chapter about the Black Cardinals in his 2013 book, "Hidden History of Roanoke." Other bits of history can be found in professor and historian Reginald Shareef's pictorial book, "The Roanoke Valley's African American Heritage," and in Darrell J. Howard's "Sunday Coming: Black Baseball in Virginia."

Otherwise, the stories lived in the memories of people who were there, playing and watching ballgames on Sunday afternoons when fans walked or took the streetcar to Springwood Park, toting picnic baskets, blankets and the occasional jar of homebrew.

Just about all those people are gone now.

In his chapter about the Black Cardinals, Harris writes: “The Cardinals, like many teams preceding them, had such raw talent that, if times had been different, some players might have had an opportunity to play professionally.”

Times being what they were, though, meant that the Cardinals and other Black ballclubs played against teams from places that included Bedford, Salem, Vinton, Radford, Pulaski and sometimes squads from West Virginia and North Carolina. Although the teams might not have been full-time professional clubs, they did play for a cut of ticket sales or a guaranteed fee if they were traveling. With tickets selling anywhere from a quarter to 50 cents each, players didn’t make a lot of money, but on good days a Black baseball team could earn more than \$100 — which meant 10 bucks a man for a 10-player roster. Even in the 1940s, \$10 didn’t go very far when your team was traveling to Greensboro, North Carolina, or Slab Fork, West Virginia, to play a baseball game.

Local baseball teams weren’t different from other institutions of Roanoke’s 20th-century civic life — usually, the N&W was involved.

Some of Roanoke’s earliest semi-professional baseball teams — whether white or African American clubs — were sponsored by the railway. One of Roanoke’s earliest successful Black teams was the N&W All-Stars, which included players who would later form the

Black Cardinals. According to Harris' book, a white N&W supervisor named Roy Gable hired many Black workers by asking this pertinent question: "Can you play ball?"

The Black Cardinals' heyday was right after World War II and just before integration chipped away at Black-only rosters. Player-manager Jim "Bull" Jones powered a lineup that included the speedy brother tandem of Mack and Henry Craighead, and outfielders George Brown and George Hampton, whose gloves turned extra-base hits into outs. Catcher Fred Rice and third baseman Red Williams were powerful sluggers in the middle of a formidable lineup.

Springwood was packed for many Sunday ballgames, with even more fans watching from outside the ballpark atop a knoll called "Panic Hill." The city had constructed a landfill next to the ballfield, a health hazard that became a flashpoint in city racial relations until it closed in 1963, and some Cardinals fans sat on oil drums they had repossessed from the dump.

A hogpen lay beyond the rightfield fence — an inviting target for a left-handed power hitter like the mighty Jones. Whenever the player-manager stepped to the plate, fans would holler, "Wake the hogs up, Jim! Make 'em talk!"

In 1997, longtime Roanoke funeral director and businessman Lawrence Hamlar, who as a boy had chased after home run balls at Springwood Park, told *The Roanoke Times*, "Jim Jones was our Babe Ruth."

At least two Roanokers played in the major Negro League: Mack Eggleston, who played for numerous teams in the 1910s and '20s that included the Baltimore Black Sox and Baltimore Elites, and LeGrande,

who played for the Memphis Red Sox, the fabled Kansas City Monarchs and an all-star team managed by Hall of Famer Satchel Paige.

LeGrande hooked up with an integrated minor-league team affiliated with the New York Yankees in 1960, but the Bronx Bombers, who were one of the last teams to integrate, had Black catcher Elston Howard at the Major League level and did not seem motivated to bring up another African American backstop. LeGrande ended his career and returned home, where he worked for General Electric and he and wife, Mary, raised a family.

LeGrande died on April 13 at age 83. He is enshrined in the Salem-Roanoke Baseball Hall of Fame at the Salem ballpark, along with the late Henry Craighead, a former Roanoke Black Cardinal.

Eyes on the future

Denham, a Baltimore native, is a lifelong baseball fan and devotee of the Baltimore Orioles. During his travels as a United Church of Christ minister, he lived for a while in Northern Virginia, where he joined a network of Negro League historians who wanted to raise awareness about forgotten Black baseball players. He likes to point out that Jackie Robinson joined the United Church of Christ, a denomination that includes social justice as part of its mission, not long before his death.

“He went into the Hall of Fame as a member of the UCC,” Denham said with a shade of pride.

Upon arriving in Roanoke in 2007, Denham learned about LeGrande's career and soon met the former player. Over the years, LeGrande earned attention locally for his career — a biography was published about his playing days and the Salem Red Sox honored him during their annual African American Heritage Night promotions, which in 2018 included a commemorative Larry LeGrande bobblehead figure giveaway.

Denham wants more people to know about LeGrande's career and the story of the Black Cardinals and other African American baseball teams from Roanoke. His exhibit is small now, but he has connections with the Negro Southern League Museum in Birmingham, Alabama, which he hopes could one day be a home for a display about Roanoke baseball. At age 74, he knows he needs younger people to take an interest in this project.

LeGrande was honored posthumously before the Red Sox game on June 16, as a few friends and family members threw out ceremonial first pitches. Among those folks were LeGrande's wife, Mary, and his great-grandson, Jon LeGrande Jr., a college baseball player at Wabash Valley College in Indiana, where this spring he batted .298 with a couple of home runs and 13 stolen bases as a freshman centerfielder on a team that won 57 games, lost only 13 and made it to the quarterfinals of the junior college national championship tournament.

Jon grew up in the Bronx, the home base for the team that denied his great-grandfather a chance to move up the minor-league ladder more than 60 years ago. He knows some of the family legend, having visited Roanoke over the years as a kid. He has heard the story about his great-grandpa leaving home to join the Memphis Red Sox, taking two whole chickens in a paper sack that his mother killed and cooked for him to eat during the train ride.

His great-grandfather is gone now, so somebody else will have to tell those stories.

“He kept up with me,” he said of Larry. “He liked to follow how I was doing and how the team was doing.”

Jon’s dad, Jon LeGrande Sr., said that Larry gave his son a few baseball tips during those visits.

“When we’d play travel ball, and come to places like Northern Virginia, Larry would go to see him play,” Jon Sr. said. “Larry focused on him. He always wanted somebody in the family to make the Major Leagues.”

As Jon LeGrande writes his own baseball story, Denham still doesn’t want folks to forget the past.

“This is a core part of Roanoke’s history,” he said. “People don’t know the details about Gainsboro or the Black Cardinals. You can’t move ahead into the future without knowing the truth about your history.”

Patrick County author Martin Clark: ‘Places are characters in my books’

The retired circuit court judge releases his sixth book, “The Plinko Bounce,” on Tuesday. Like most of his previous novels, it covers familiar ground, unfolding across the foothills of Patrick County and environs.

by **Ralph Berrier Jr.**
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Andy Hughes has had it with being a public defender.

For nearly 20 years, he’s stood up in the Patrick County Courthouse to represent what he calls “The Reliables” — the repeat offenders whose hard-luck stories read like screenplays of courtroom dramas that detail every drunk in public, indecent exposure and assault and battery charge in “Groundhog Day”-like fashion. Hughes has fought the good fight for these clients almost daily, with little gratitude from the Reliables and little pay from the state. He’s done with this job.

His boss in the public defender office, Vikram Kapil, wants him to wrap up one more case before he goes, though. Hughes has to finalize the plea deal for Damian Bullins, a local sociopath who admitted that he slit the throat of a woman who was married to one of the county’s most prominent businessmen. The case is open and shut.

But as often happens in Hughes' life, simple things get complicated really quickly. A clerical error threatens the plea deal and ultimately casts doubt on his client's guilt. A hotshot prosecutor is brought in from another county, right in the middle of his own state senate race. The national spotlight turns to the little mountain town of Stuart to cover the grisly murder case.

And even though some of the characters are real and Stuart itself is a real place, the rest of the story is all from the imagination of Martin Clark, the retired Patrick County judge whose sixth novel, "The Plinko Bounce" (Rare Bird Books), comes out Tuesday. His latest legal potboiler tells the story of a burned-out public defender who questions his own belief in justice as he represents a man who confessed to a heinous murder but who might deservedly go free.

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Like most of his other novels, starting with his 2000 debut, "The Many Aspects of Mobile Home Living" (Knopf), Clark's new book covers familiar ground, literally: The story unfolds across the foothills of Patrick County, where Clark has lived just about his entire life, and through the courtrooms and law offices in places such as Stuart and Martinsville, where he worked and where the seeds of many fictional legal dramas were planted.

Even though many of his stories detour through big cities and sometimes hit the road out West, Patrick County is home turf for his characters and their often outrageous tales.

“Places are characters in my books,” Clark, 64, said in a telephone interview last week. “You need to write about what you know. You’ve got to get all the small details right in a setting so that it rings true with people in the region who read it.”

Many readers will recognize familiar names and places in “The Plinko Bounce.” Kapil really heads the public defender office in Halifax County (“He’s a great lawyer,” Clark said), and Ararat and Mount Airy are almost within hollerin’ distance from each other along the Virginia-North Carolina line.

Before retiring in 2019 after 27 years on the bench, Clark pulled double-duty as a circuit court judge and author, and he filled his novels with precise legal knowledge and plot twists.

“I always told people I’d rather be a writer than a judge,” Clark said.

Writing is mostly a full-time occupation these days, although he and his wife, Deana, stay busy on their farm with multiple dogs, cats, chickens and three donkeys.

He still finds inspiration from the region where he lives and from the legal system he watched from a front-row seat.

Courtroom stories are “the best kind of drama,” Clark said. “It’s real-life drama. It’s about loss of freedom, loss of life, loss of money. ... It’s bad reality TV. It’s like watching ‘American Idol’ without the occasional good song.”

Clark maintains that his stories are complete fiction, except that they flowered from kernels of facts he might have observed in cases. He

sprinkles his novels with the names of friends, usually in positive contexts. One time, an unnamed friend balked at being named as the bad guy in one of Clark's novels.

"I told one dear friend that I wanted him to be a villain, and he said he didn't want to be," Clark said. "He appeared in a later book as a corporation. I used his initials to be the acronym for a corporation."

(Which sounds like it could be as bad as being a villain, but that's another story.)

From the beginning of his publishing career, Clark has earned praise for fast-moving stories. His publicists have gotten much mileage out of an early review from *The New York Times*, which called Clark "not only the thinking man's John Grisham but, maybe better, the drinking man's John Grisham." That's the kind of praise that not even one of the crooks in Clark's novels could buy.

The new novel's title comes from the game (popularized on "The Price is Right") in which a flat disc slides down a board, bouncing and pinballing off pegs as it heads to the bottom, where it lands in one of several slots that could contain fabulous prizes or nothing at all. For public defender Hughes, the quest for justice has become like that erratic Plinko disc.

The story takes place in a masked-up 2020 as people, and the court system, try to cope with the early days of the pandemic. Although COVID is not a major factor in the story's plot, the timing and setting establish a jittery, anxious tone to the environment.

“The best I can tell, nobody is using the pandemic as a backdrop” for stories, Clark said. “The book isn’t about that, but when you couple the pandemic with the opioid crisis and poverty [in Patrick County], we got a double and triple whammy. And add the context that Patrick County doesn’t have a hospital right now, and we have such limited medical access, all that just compounds the problems.”

Fellow authors and book publications have already raved about “The Plinko Bounce.” Roanoke best-selling author Beth Macy (“Dopesick”) called it Clark’s “tour de force.” Former Southwest Virginian Adriana Trigiani (“Big Stone Gap”) described Clark as “a master craftsman who exalts the genre of legal thriller to heavenly heights. Ain’t nobody following him that will ever do better.”

Matthew Quick, whose bestseller “The Silver Linings Playbook” was the basis for the 2012 movie starring Jennifer Lawrence and Bradley Cooper, said Clark’s new novel contains “all the legal tomfoolery of ‘Better Call Saul’ and the dutiful heart of ‘Longmire.’”

Macy said that Clark’s writing is a boon for Southwest and Southside Virginia because it depicts the people with an honesty, integrity and respect that often is lacking in coverage the region gets from national media.

“Martin Clark elevates rural Virginia, and he does it in a wily, witty way that keeps us on the edge of our seats and makes us proud to be from the same place as him,” Macy said.

Clark doesn’t care much for the phrase “legal thriller” to describe his stories, he said. To him, “thriller” implies chase scenes, close calls, violence and fast-moving three-page chapters. Clark’s books are almost more character-based than plot-based, as unfortunate souls

wriggle in and out of tight spots, using cunning and brainpower. That's perhaps where the "thinking man's John Grisham" description comes from.

"My books are like a riff of music, where you'll get a tiny poetry riff every now and then," said Clark, himself a big music fan, especially of roots-based artists who perform at festivals such as Bristol's Rhythm & Roots, which he attended last weekend.

The trick, he said, is to make the plots seem like they could happen in the real world, in a place like Stuart, Virginia. Andy Hughes, the public-defending protagonist in "The Plinko Bounce," is a realistic character: underpaid, fed up and burned out. His client is equally realistic: thankless, paranoid and a self-identified victim of a corrupt justice system.

Even though his stories deal with nuances and vagaries of the American legal system, and even though the plot of "The Plinko Bounce" hinges on a courthouse mistake, Clark said that he never wavered in his trust in the courts during his time as a lawyer and as a judge. He said that only twice in three decades did he observe cases where "the outcome didn't track with the truth," he said.

"There's this feeling out there that the system is fixed on some level but the truth is, it is not," he said. "I saw hard-working people in criminal law all day long. Every judge I ever met was honest. There's no bribery, no boondoggle behind the scenes."

He pointed out that the most controversial verdicts these days are usually handed down by juries — not by paid-off judges or crooked lawyers — in which a dozen local members of a community have decided what is just.

“When I was a judge, people would come up to me on the street and condemn a decision, and I would ask them, ‘Did you hear the case?’” he said. “Most verdicts that are condemned are jury verdicts. The people in your community are following the law. Basically, when somebody complains about a verdict they’re saying, ‘My friends and neighbors in the community got it wrong,’ which is not the case.”

Clark believes strongly in his own community, so much so that he will hold his book-launch event at the Patrick County branch of the Blue Ridge Public Library on Tuesday from 3:30 until 8 p.m. During the event, Clark will award a \$10,000 scholarship to a Patrick County High School student in memory of his former English teacher, the late Ann Belcher.

“This county has always supported me,” said Clark, whose mother was a second-grade teacher for many years. The scholarship is a way to say thank you from him and his wife, he said.

Books will be on sale during Tuesday’s event, said branch manager Garry Clifton, who added that Clark is so popular in Stuart that folks can expect long waits to meet their hometown hero.

“Last time he did a signing at the library, we sold over 500 books and people were lined up from 3 o’clock till 8,” Clifton said. “It was actually 8:30 when we got out last time. He’s a native son, a humble guy and a really interesting person.”

Clark will also hold an event at independent bookstore Book No Further in Roanoke at 6:30 p.m. Thursday. People must purchase a book from the store to attend the event. More information can be found at <https://buff.ly/45vS3bA>.

Even with all the critical hoopla, endorsements from big-time authors, appearances on bestseller lists and comparisons to John Grisham, Clark said he just wants readers to enjoy themselves when they read his books.

“I write books that are fun,” Clark said. “If folks are going to spend \$28 on a book, it needs to be entertaining, tell a good story and provide a good time and an ending they didn’t see coming.”

Martin Clark’s books

“The Many Aspects of Mobile Home Living” (Knopf, 2000)

“Plain Heathen Mischief” (Knopf, 2004)

“The Legal Limit” (Knopf, 2008)

“The Jezebel Remedy” (Knopf, 2015)

“The Substitution Order” (Knopf, 2019)

“The Plinko Bounce” (Rare Bird Books, 2023)

The owners of two historic Roanoke cemeteries want to give the properties to the city — but the city doesn't want them

No heirs are interested in running Fair View Cemetery or Cedar Lawn Memorial Park, and efforts to find other buyers have been unsuccessful. But Roanoke officials say the city shouldn't be in the business of owning cemeteries.

by **Ralph Berrier Jr.**

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Myrteen Cronk Heslep's start in the family business required that she work the graveyard shift — literally.

As a teenager, Heslep's job was to cut grass around the tombstones of Fair View Cemetery by hand. Even at a low wage, Heslep made pretty good money considering that the cemetery, which was owned by her father, Russell Cronk, spread across 57 acres and contained thousands of graves.

“I made 25 cents a marker,” Heslep recalled. “I had to get down on my hands and knees with a pair of hand clippers.”

Those markers bore the names of some of Roanoke's founders — mayors, congressmen and even that of Charles Thomas, whose

midnight horse ride in 1881, the legend goes, played a huge role in Roanoke's creation story. Thomas rode toward Buchanan along the muddy turnpike as part of a relay to deliver a \$10,000 guaranteed note from local businessmen to railroad moguls meeting in Lexington, who were persuaded to build the line that created the "Magic City" boomtown of Roanoke the next year. The dead not only are buried at Fair View, but history also lives here.

Heslep's brother, Dennis Cronk, was no slouch himself, digging graves with a backhoe, mowing grass, helping with funerals and other jobs at Fair View, a 133-year-old cemetery in Northwest Roanoke that the family has overseen since 1965. The Cronks' family home on 31st Street was virtually part of Fair View, encircled by a stone wall that matched the cemetery's rock façade and with a backyard that included an entrance into the burial park.

"I practically grew up in the cemetery," Dennis Cronk said.

Sometimes, though, even a cemetery must transition to the next realm, and that is the reality the Cronk and Heslep family now faces. With no heirs interested in running Fair View or Cedar Lawn Memorial Park, the family's other cemetery, and their effort to find other buyers unsuccessful, the board of directors plans to dissolve the nonprofit foundation that has operated the cemeteries for nearly 40 years and give the properties to the city of Roanoke, which it hopes will take over operations later this year.

"We're not selling it," Cronk said. "We're giving it away. We tried to identify another corporation that would take over, but we could not make it happen. We wanted to find someone who would be personally responsible to see that the cemetery goes forward. The best option is for the city to assume that responsibility."

The problem is that so far the city does not seem interested in accepting the gift of two cemeteries.

The decision to accept or reject the proposal to operate the cemeteries, one of which dates back to Roanoke's first decade of existence, could eventually land in the lap of the city council. However, Roanoke's mayor and city attorney both said last week that the city prefers that a private owner, not the city government, take over the cemeteries.

"I can't speak for everybody, but I believe that the consensus of city council is that this is not something the city should undertake," Mayor Sherman Lea said.

City attorney Tim Spencer said that Roanoke officials have been working with the cemetery's board for more than a year to find private owners to take over. He, like Lea, said that the city should not assume ownership of Fair View and Cedar Lawn.

Spencer said that even though the decision is up to the council, in his opinion, "the city is not in the cemetery business."

The final resting place of magnates and paupers, veterans and infants

Saying the cemetery has a pretty fair view is an understatement.

Fair View sits atop a hill that rises between Melrose Avenue to the north and Salem Turnpike to the south. Standing at the top of the hill near the main office affords a panoramic view of practically every major mountain peak that encircles the Roanoke Valley — from Tinker, Read and Fort Lewis to Bent Mountain and Poor Mountain.

Mill Mountain and the Roanoke Star, which didn't shine in fluorescent glory until the cemetery was nearly 60 years old, are also visible from Fair View. Other neighboring landmarks subsequently took the same name, including Fairview United Methodist Church and Fairview Elementary School.

The spot, now flanked by convenience stores, a Burger King, storage buildings, a Virginia ABC store and other urban businesses, would have been considered way out in the country when it was founded in 1890, just eight years after Roanoke's steam-powered birth.

Before the Shenandoah Valley and Norfolk & Western lines turned Roanoke into a boomtown crossroads, the previous hamlet of Big Lick operated its own cemetery, a small plot now called the City Cemetery which sits adjacent to the Roanoke Rescue Mission today near downtown. (The city still owns that cemetery.) With the population explosion of the 1880s — Roanoke grew from fewer than 1,000 to more than 16,000 in eight years, a 2,000-percent increase that spawned the Magic City name — city fathers knew that the City Cemetery was not a sufficient burial ground.

According to a Fair View history on [the company's website](#), a few Roanoke families pooled money to buy property west of the city in the winter of 1890. Some bodies were moved from the City Cemetery to the new property, which offered a quiet resting place some 4 miles west of the cacophony and tumult of city's railroad shops, railyards and boisterous, muddy, smelly downtown.

Henry Trout, one of Roanoke's founders and early mayors, is buried in Fair View. Congressman Clifton Woodrum, a significant politician whose name adorned the airport of Woodrum Field and who rode in an open-top limousine with President Franklin Roosevelt to the

opening of the Veterans Administration Hospital in 1934, lies here next to his wife, Martha, beneath an impressive 6-foot-tall white bell tower.

Ten mayors of Roanoke and two from Big Lick are buried here, including Roy Webber, the florist who became Roanoke mayor and for whom the Roy Webber Expressway was named following his death from a heart attack in 1975. Among the 26,000 graves are buried veterans from nearly every war since the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812 (those bodies were reinterred from other cemeteries; the cemetery also features a plaza dedicated to military veterans and offers free burial space for veterans), state legislators and judges, as well as railroad workers who perished on the job and dozens of babies who died during the 1918 influenza pandemic.

Some inscriptions bear gruesome details, such as the description of James D. Jackson's death in 1893.

The weathered lettering is difficult to read, but basically states that Jackson was “[K]illed on the SVRR,” which stood for Shenandoah Valley Railroad. It goes on to say that Jackson “[I]n the crash and the fall ... stood unmoved and sacrificed his life so that he might fulfill his trust,” or words to that effect.

The tombstone for Thomas and Laura Goodman is notable for the intricately carved granite Norfolk & Western engine and rail car that sits atop the marker. Flowers, lambs and other bas-relief images adorn the tombstones.

In a northwest plot of the cemetery, rows of small gravesites are topped with flat markers engraved with no names or words, only with

numbers or dates that reveal the 1918-19 pandemic's tragic toll, especially on the young.

That section of the cemetery also includes names that appear to be Eastern European or Asian, including some embossed with Asian characters, owing to Roanoke's legacy as a city of immigrants since its earliest railroad days. Jewish and Black people are buried here, many entombed from an era when Roanoke and the rest of the Jim Crow South were cleaved by segregation.

Heslep, now the president of the board of the nonprofit F.V. Cemetery Co. Inc., said that her father often helped poor families bury their dead, sometimes for free.

"He gave away space for the burials of some babies," she said. Russell Cronk tried to accommodate indigent people, especially if they already had family buried at Fair View.

For decades, Fair View operated under its original charter as a privately owned cemetery, through several different presidents, including members of the Griggs family, whose ancestors included a mayor of Big Lick and who helmed the company for nearly 50 years, according to the cemetery's records. In 1909, the cemetery became the first in Virginia to establish a perpetual care fund to cover future operating expenses, a fund that now exceeds \$3 million.

Russell Cronk, a World War II U.S. Army veteran, went to work for the Griggs family after the war and eventually became a manager before rising to president of Fair View in 1965. That same year, the Fair View Cemetery Company took over Cedar Lawn, a privately owned burial park near the intersection of Peters Creek and Cove roads, a move that brought additional income to sustain the company. In 1983, the Fair

View company converted to nonprofit and established the Fair View Foundation, which allowed the cemetery board to accept charitable donations and to run fundraising campaigns.

Today, though, no next generation of family members or outsiders is interested in taking over the cemetery, Dennis Cronk said. That led the board to explore options that include turning the cemeteries over to the city.

Heslep said that the board wants to make sure the cemetery, which hosts about 200 burials a year, remains viable for future generations and that nine full-time employees are kept on the job. Cronk said the cemetery is financially sound and still has space to accommodate burials for several decades. About 14 acres of Fair View and 5 in Cedar Lawn are unused.

“This is one of the best-run cemeteries in the Roanoke Valley,” Heslep said. “It’s in very good condition with competent employees. All the computer systems and bookkeeping are up to date. Everything is there for a sound transition.”

A deadline looms, with no buyer in sight

Fair View’s leaders contacted Roanoke officials more than a year and a half ago to broach the possibility of turning over the cemeteries to the city. Cronk and others met with City Manager Bob Cowell and showed a slide presentation of their plan on June 24, 2021.

Bill Hopkins, the board’s attorney, provided to Roanoke officials a list of 60 cemeteries in Virginia that are owned by municipalities, a list he

said is not comprehensive. He also cited Virginia law that allows for land to be transferred to municipalities for use as cemeteries.

“We’ve told them that this was coming multiple times,” Hopkins said of his communication with Roanoke leaders.

Cronk, who has more than 40 years as a real estate developer and is chairman and CEO of the Roanoke-based Poe & Cronk Real Estate Group, said that he tried to find private buyers for the cemeteries, and he even enlisted the help of a broker that specializes in cemetery property.

“I’ve tried for 15 years to find somebody” to buy the cemeteries, Cronk said. “I hired a cemetery broker from Las Vegas, I’ve talked to corporations. I’ve had no luck.”

Cronk said that he understands that some might not think that operating a cemetery is a core public service that city government should undertake. But he said that Fair View’s history and the fact that the board will give approximately \$3 million in perpetual care funds to the city should make the transition more palatable to city leaders.

“We don’t believe this will be a drain on city resources,” Cronk said.

It’s not clear that the city has been persuaded by the offer, however. Cowell was out of town last week and could not comment about Fair View and Cedar Lawn. Earlier this month, Hopkins delivered a letter to Lea and other city council members that urged council to schedule a public hearing regarding a potential transfer of the cemeteries. So far, no hearing has been scheduled.

The agenda for city council's Tuesday meeting does include a request for a closed meeting to discuss "the possible acquisition of real estate in the Northern area of the City of Roanoke, where discussion in an open meeting would adversely affect the bargaining position or negotiating strategy of the public body," which could possibly be in regards to the Fair View and Cedar Lawn offers.

Lea said that the offer might be discussed at a future council meeting, but maintained that "a consistent majority [of council] are opposed to getting involved with that."

Spencer said that no one with the city has shown "any intention to take over ownership" of the cemeteries. He likened the situation to that of any other privately owned company that goes out of business.

"A lot of businesses dissolve," he said. "And the city does not take them over."

Spencer said he was surprised that the Fair View board hired a public relations firm to send news releases that announced its intention to give the cemeteries to the city. He called that move a "head-scratcher" that seemed to be designed to encourage public support for the group's offer to have the city take over the cemeteries.

"They hired a PR firm to pressure the city," Spencer said. "That was a bit disturbing. But I think we can still work together and find somebody in the private sector."

Spencer said that he had conversations with three potential operators for the cemeteries.

Jennifer Eddy, president of the Roanoke-based Eddy Alexander agency that has handled the board's public strategy, said that her firm was not hired to pressure the city, but to help communicate Fair View's plans to families with loved ones buried in the cemeteries and to the general public.

"We needed to tell family and employees about what was happening," Eddy said. "We mailed letters to families, and sent postcards to neighbors. We wanted to tell community leaders that we are running out of options for succession."

The nonprofit foundation that operates the cemeteries will dissolve June 30. If there is no successor — whether city government or a private business — a receiver might be appointed to take over the cemeteries and look for a buyer.

"We don't think that will be successful," Hopkins said.

Board member Charles Hunter, who has four generations of family members buried at Fair View, said that Cronk and Heslep have worked diligently to find a suitable successor to their family leadership.

"They have a passion for the cemeteries," Hunter said. "They haven't done a thing for themselves, but have done everything to make sure these cemeteries are around for the future."

Regardless of whom the next owner of the cemeteries will be, Cronk said decisions need to be made soon.

“We need time to bring folks up to speed to make this transition work,” Cronk said. “Our job is to see that the future is secured. The best option is for the city to take over.”